From Iowa Outward

Poems
by

Ann Struthers

The Struthers Family
Cedar Rapids, IA

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Introduction

Eleanor Ann Struthers, Ph.D. (1930-2024), an author, teacher, wife, and mother of four, was an energetic and enthusiastic lover of life. Born and educated in Iowa, she lived most of her life there, completing degrees at Morningside College and the University of Iowa. During the second half of her teaching career, she offered courses in American and Middle Eastern Literature and in creative writing at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, IA.

At her death on 24 February 2024 she left many typescripts of poems, published and unpublished, that were never collected in a published volume. As her close friend for many years, I agreed with her children to attempt completing several of her collections for some form of publication that would make her work more accessible.

Ann Struthers left two main unpublished collections of poems centering on women's lives. On her computer hard drive, *Yeast* was last saved in 2018, *Women of Persia, Iowa* in 2017. I have constructed a collection of these poems, using *Yeast*, the largest, as a basis. To this is I have added other relevant poems from her files. As with the other categories I have used to group her poems, this one has blurred edges. A number of the poems here, especially from *Yeast*, appear in her other collections, and those collections sometimes contain a few poems that could as easily be here.

Though based in Iowa, with her husband, Melvin, she travelled widely in the North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, teaching abroad for three years as a Fulbright Professor in Syria and Sri Lanka. Many of her poems focused on "place," on the conditions and influences of the landscapes she explored and came to know. Many of these, while firmly located in a particular locale also studied the people who were connected with the setting. This volume collects her poems that seem to fall into this large category, beginning with her first published collection, *Stoneboat and Other Poems* (1988). Following this reprinting appear the many related poems that have not been gathered into books.

I have allowed this category to be expansive, in part because Struthers so clearly was deeply engaged with place throughout her writing career, and in part because so many of her poems seem to fit better in this category than in the others she suggested or that I invented to organize her work: writers' lives, women's lives, the fine arts, animals, and her experience of Syria and the Middle East. I realize that another reader might well have organized them differently. In fact, a few of these poems are repeated in other volumes.

In the few cases where publication information appears with the text, this has been included. Dates for a few poems indicate the last date an electronic text was saved, or they appear on the typescript.

Terry Heller
Coe College
2026

Friends

Gif ye want ae friend that's true,
I'm on your list — Burns

Yes, old Robbie, you're on my list,
and I hope I'm on yours,
you who sang while sowing the mortgaged seed
in the clods of the mortgaged field,
only the mouse was unencumbered —
and it all came to nothing, but still you sang.

And you, Will Shakespeare, who loved the stage,
the crack and cackle of Falstaff s laughter,
the terrible silence when Lady Macbeth
emerged from Duncan's chamber, her hands dripping,
incarnadine. I will, "Good friend, forbear for Jesu's sake."

But there is you, Kathleen, and David the poet,
and David the editor, Yvonne, Terry & Linda,
Robert D., Gordon, Evelyn and Cliff, Linda V. and Linda B.,
Tom, some other dear ones dead long ago.
You are my courage, my treasures
and pleasure. Like good wine and good songs,
good friends, as night approaches,
"grant me still a friend in my retreat,"
Barbara, Nancy, Grace Ann!

Stoneboat and Other Poems

In memory of my mother and father
Ann and Fred Mohr

The Farm

Stoneboat

We pick up the rocks waiting in complete
obstinacy, half hidden to crack the plowshare,
break the tooth of the harrow, bend the blade of
the reaper, our fingers sore with pulling them out
of their beds. The horses, patient, stoneboat
dragging behind them
like our lives, heavy, wheel-less.
Then you found the blue granite Indian hammer,
shaped, worked, not like those old, worn heads we
had been lugging — lost on this hill above the lake
a thousand years or more.
We heft it, mallet, shank.
Both horses shake their harness.
Wind passes over days like dry grass. A stone
tongue does not tell much.

Anna Margaret Smith's Brooch

the gaudy brooch of my
great-grandmother, rectangular with
twisted border,
four slender chains with red stones dangling,
worn on the ample bosom of her one good
dress. It glittered when she breathed
bought from a peddler's pack when she was a
girl, before she pulled her hair into an iron
knot, before she married and bore three sets of
twins, before Ben died, before the drought
and the foreclosure, when she was foolish and full
of
laughter and had two good dresses.

Estherville Meteorite

Here is the fiery rock
of heaven, burned out, charred,
only a smooth black stone in the
library at Estherville, Iowa, which lit up the sky
over half a continent, burning 2000 acres of
wheat where it landed, scattering shards over
two counties. Young swains took their girls on
buggy rides to pick up fragments; at picnics in
the country they searched for splinters that had
ridden through the universe leaving flaming
trails behind them, carved finger rings
and necklaces from stone that had orbited other
galaxies, had part in comets born and suns
collapsing. The girls said it felt warm on the
hand, hot on the breast.

Watching the Outdoor Movie Show

On summer Saturday nights in Persia,
Iowa, I saw the Lone Ranger and Tonto and
the great white horse Silver, while overhead
in the coffee sky
a meteor shower began. Wild horses
of the West galloped across the screen becoming
stars, shooting toward the edge of the universe. I
rode the leader, his flaming mane throwing
off sparks as we whistled through the wind across
the prairies of ennui, into the forested foothills,
down the forbidden canyons.
Even now the horses of the stars canter early
on Sunday mornings.

Picking Fallen Corn in Persia, Iowa

The Chinese pheasants,
red ring around the cock's neck encircled with
white and jet, cry in Mandarin, resonant.
Their feathers, Oriental, glint green: they hide
and chirr in fox grass, mullein, cocklebur,
lonesome for
bamboo reeds that print
dark, delicate shadows. Here, cold and poor in
Persia,
ice-pearled snow-sifted furrows, a girl
picks up, throws the gold
corn, hears the famous bird's alien epithet,
she, too, hungry for an art, for icons, false and
luminous.

Glass Jars

The farm women of Persia, Iowa, look
sixty, are forty, have too many children,
keep a big garden,
all summer long picking, carrying water
from the well for washing, slicing,
canning. They fill fruit cellars with Atlas
strongshoulder jars of pink rhubarb,
golden sliced apples, red globe
cherries, can two hundred glass jars of
fat tomatoes, one hundred jars of
green beans, one hundred jars of
yellow corn. They know how to work;
some of them forget how to
laugh. They are too tired to
complain, too tired to be
proud. They sleep on thin
mattresses, lie on the thin
edge of despair. Their daughters wear short skirts
and long hair, dream of
Chicago's white towers and
stores with plate glass
windows filled with topaz,
emeralds, rubies.

Slaughter

A man waits with a long knife
While the horses, suspended by the hind legs
Move on the ingenious machine.
The strawberry roan whinnies
And twists, but the sweating Man
is ready. He plunges the honed steel
into the great neck: a river
Of hot blood runs down his arm
Before he can jump back.

A farmer goes after the dog,
the dog gone bad suddenly in August
days and now madly ripping
at the throat of a stupid sheep.
The dog stands over the torn body,
his tongue hanging out,
no shame in him.

The farmer aims his shotgun
This is the dog who played with the children.
These do what needs doing
And come home, tired
Or sad. And honest.

But he who deals
In words
To sell folly
Or to buy war,
he is already dead.

And sometimes at night
He remembers who killed him.

Note

A slightly different version appeared in Where is Vietnam? Edited by Walter Lowenfells, Doubleday, 1967

Threshing Rig Royalty

Pappy Hopkins, the engineer, having blasphemed
through the precipitating ritual,
bruising the July air,
has made his snorting god ready.
The firebox is appeased. The engineer
lifts his heavy gloved hand and gives
the signal. The drive wheel begins
turning the great wide belt connecting
it to the grain separator.
The engineer is the king.

Hank Zitterick, the separator man,
stands on top of his machine, spitting
accurately to the right and left, watching
the smaller belts, the cogs and wheels, and lifting
the brass petcocks and anointing with oil.
The separator man is the prince.

The first two young dukes have driven
their loaded racks into position, one on each side
of the feeder. They begin alternately tossing
bundles of grain onto the long tongue
that will carry them up to where
the curved red teeth are chomping the air.

A few minutes later a golden shower
comes out of the blower. The stacker works
under it all day, moving the straw and shaping it
as it rises into a great golden loaf.
But the stacker isn't anybody.

Down Corn

Stalks tough, leaves sharp. Bend
over, pull the fallen corn, throw
against the bangboard. Muddy furrow
half frozen, slip on its greasy side.
Cotton gloves wet, breath steams, great breath
of horses steams, harness creaks.
Throw ears against the bangboard
all morning under heavy sky.

One stalk standing, its yellow ear soft,
black smut curving out of it, voluptuous,
black maidens dancing under the warm sun,
their black breasts swaying, hear tom-toms.
Corn hits bangboard. She curls cold fingers
inside the palms of her gloves,
listens to faraway dancing.

Open the endgate, scoop out
yellow corn. Their snouts tilted
in the air, the pigs run toward it.
They follow the cattle, nose the dung
for undigested kernels, but this
is the real gold. The mortgage-lifters
squeal. One hundred bushels of corn
is fat on the hog, money in the bank,
glory in heaven.

Nobody to marry
but Harold Krawkov down the road
who has bad breath, beats his horses.

Hard Words

Placid as the face of a Madonna,
this quiet Iowa field Iowa field moves,
heaves beneath the grass;
in the night she casts
up stones to nick
the plow next spring. Walk
the furrows, pick up rocks, throw
them on the wagon. She gnashes
her teeth and in the dark
of the moon spits granite.

Oyster Shell

Iowa farm wife
spreads blue-white crushed
oyster shell for chickens,
holds a handful, watching
pale winter sun change pearl.
The closest touch of ocean
is eight hundred miles south.

The world womb of the sea
is rocked by tides,
tugged by moon over coral gardens
where bone roses bloom. She,
who has been seeded on white sheets,
hears the call of the water,
drifts to rocky inlets,
becomes fish again, swims dark
between roots
toward that first mother song.

Barbwire

The old Polasky brothers built fence
by lantern light. They were used to working
in the dark. Herbert spent two years in the pen
for stealing corn. He had a mail-order wife.
She had a child and everybody said
it was the hired man's.

She hadn't known about the farmhouse
half a mile from the road, no grove, wind
blowing dirt from plowed fields into the scrubbed
kitchen,
manure on her husband's boots,
and loneliness her only neighbor.

You should have seen their fence posts,
whacked from old branches, knotted, leaning
crazy.
They didn't cut down the brush along the road.
They left the chokecherries, their new red
branches, their blossoms like white thumbs
in spring, the bitter berries for birds
to quarrel over in summer. I remember their
lantern,
the rolls of barbwire unwinding across the dark.

The corn will not escape, Herbert Polasky, the
wheat
will rush against the iron prongs and lie there
In the fence row for you to capture,
but the wife ran away
and left you the boy.

The Dance

All of us farm girls
put on our glad rags
and go into town.
It's Saturday night
and there's a dance in Stratman's Hall.

Wild Bill got fired yesterday,
that wild kid from nowhere.
Wild Bill broke his pitchfork handle
across the nose
of Dad's fancy strawberry roan.

We dance with the boys
who wear clean jeans and clean
shirts, and the band plays
LOUD.
They smell of beer
and sweat in the August night.
Dearie McClay is dancing drunk,
the Peterson twins start a fight,
Eddie Bolinsky, shirt sleeves
rolled to his armpits, flexes his muscles.
But Wild Bill isn't there, that wild kid.

"The Attic Which Is Desire"

She stands erect only in the center,
walks with head down; when she forgets,
a red rafter knocks against her skull.

Here are the crannies where the bat hangs,
leather wings in origami folds —
flies suddenly, silent as appetite.
Here is the dark corner where the snake skins
are nailed to the wall to cure.
She thinks she hears the naked snakes
return at night, rustle around the corners.
And here she has laid out the butternuts
to dry before removing their rough husks,
before cracking the hard shells
for the sweet, white meat.

Tea

Spirit Lake, Iowa, this January morning is ten
below
and drifts. I shovel steps, driveway, mailbox;
come in, brew a pot of hot tea and think of Ceylon,
its hills covered with dark green shrubs as tall
as the women who pick the uppermost leaves.
They chatter like finches, weave in and out with
large,
round baskets. I see their blue and orange
dresses,
the hot yellow sun, the broken umber carvings
of dancers in bas relief, holding their positions
for centuries where delicate hands spread leaves
to dry on the stone porches of ruined temples.
I sit in my kitchen, the scent of Ceylon,
the sun of ancient dancers in my mouth.

The University

"The Cars in the Air"

The Crandic Line bisects the university
in Iowa City. Engines diesel on the viaduct,
their enormous hearts vibrate with commerce,
move John Deere combines toward Nebraska,
corn syrup from Penick and Ford to Mobile,
refrigerator cars hung with red and white
carcasses
in the cool dark for Chicago and New York —
Great Northern, Milwaukee Road, Chesapeake
and Ohio,
the Rio Grande, the Rock Island Line.
The Wife of Bath scuttles toward the chapel;
La Belle Dame Sans Merci hides in weeds
beside the tracks; the sonnets' Dark Lady,
behind a column on the porch of the English-
Philosophy
Building. Somewhere down the line
another engine rocks and moans.

"The Cars in the Air" [Another version]

The Crandic Line

bisects the campus,
double engines diesel on the viaduct
between library and English Philosophy Building,
students pour under the freight for Cedar Rapids,
trickle towards Renaissance Lit., Linguistics,
and Criticism: Plato to Dryden. The mind
is a fragile spoon to hold such knowledge.
Black smoke pillared from the heating plant
    chimney
the day they elected
a new dean of the college,
engines shuttled hopper cars of coal
and gravel, metal clanged against metal
when they coupled.
Heavy, heavy hangs over their heads,
great trains of thought shuttle
day and night, freighted, weighed, bills of lading
stapled to the door of each car:
deliver to Dolores Muelenburg, Andy Reno,
Martha Crockett, Bill Bellinger, University of Iowa,
freshman, sophomore, graduate student -
crushed under the viaduct — and sometimes
a professor goes mad, too, not far down the line.

From the Library Windows

I look down on the Iowa River.
It moves darkly past the empty
music building, waiting for the wail
of oboes,

eddies by the art gallery where
Elliott jades repose, inscrutable
and cool,

past the catacombic dorms
carved in cliffs.

It dumps dead branches,
empty Grainbelt cans. Sludge
collects against the willows
trailing the water.

Students cross bridges
in bright waves. They could grow up
in Steamboat Rock or Keokuk. Here
they are marked slightly,
ripples pass over.

Risk

The poet reads about girls
and love in California. His voice
booms heavy. His poems sink like truth
in our bellies. He drinks water
like bourbon. Meets us later at Heitman's.

One of his girls told me
he wasn't much as a lover.
But she wanted to be
a great poet's mistress
and hadn't made it.

Who holds out a poem dares
everything, risks love,
oblique and flawed.

Fraternity Party

Ah, Circe, fermented corn
for your lovers outworn;
whenever one became
nothing but a lump in bed,
his ardor lame,
and his snore
intolerable, you changed
him into swine.
No more red
wine
spilled
for him. Swill.

I, having fed
Iowa pigs
on days when the sun covers
the prairies, hot and big,
leaving the hog house cool,
there the buzz of flies,
the dull
grunt of porkish lies,
I know why you chose this animal,
instincts
intact,
and manners minimal.

I see
Ulysses'
men's descendants snuffle
girls and booze and dine a
party subtle
as belted Hampshires, Poland Chinas.

I Think of Virgil's Farmer

I think of Virgil's farmer; he counts his sheep,
pulls the burrs from their wool;
his dog, black as a mulberry, stands beside him,
tail wags, tongue hangs out. I watch him lug a rock
on the steep terrace, shove it into a wall;
prune back grapevines for new growth,
drive the plowshare into the recalcitrant earth.

He comes home at sundown, washes under the plane tree
by the door, sits down to brown bread and cheese,
a comb of honey. This man doesn't care
whether words are felicitous — the pigeon his gossip,
the crow his depravity, the hawk his eloquence.

At Bergma where Mark Antony stole the library
and shipped it to Cleopatra, a farmer makes hay
by the ruins of Hadrian's Gate, a scythe in hand.
Grass and flowers fall beside the broken columns.

Books mold, paper crumbles, the stolen library
burns at Alexandria; poetry goes up in smoke,
science flakes in the ashes,.
Who wastes a life on words should know better.
Rocks remain. Burrs keep growing.

The Greatest Love Story Ever Told

Nothing like Romeo and Juliet —
passion so fast, so complete; it defies
reason, logic, circumspection, and lets
the old nurse mumble of two husbands; flies
in the face of interdiction. Bright
hopes, bad timing, but sweet love is noble
even with poison, and the sword's bite
is scarcely murder when the heart is troubled.
The feuding parents get what they deserve.
Friar Laurence, good clergyman, deceives,
insists on marriage — morals to preserve
young souls, dispenses drugs. And she believes;
wakes; Romeo is dead; falls on his dagger.
It enters cold, sharp, this lover-stranger.

Wings in Cambridge, Massachusetts

The world changes: angels with colored wings
no longer fly in Padua or Florence,
but the old masters saw them float, wind,
gather around the Virgin, sing and dance.
They were not anemic, frail white creatures,
but bright as flowers. Starna colored their
wings in shades of delphinium, feathers
of marigold, carnation, pink aster.
Where are the red angels Bartolo saw?
The indigo-winged girls Lorezetti
painted? Have they completely left this flawed
drab town that cries for hues of hope, pity?

The brightest colors here are in the hair
of the young punk rockers in Harvard Square.

Flying in the Sackler

The flying Apsaras, *a* Buddhist angel,
with pointed ears and topknot twisted hair
was ceiling carved in bas relief
in Tien-lung-sham's small cave. Released
from darkness now, he dances
on this bright air to rhythms
from his brother's limestone drum.

Bartolo's blue-winged angels
flew in Rome; in Greece
the Niki leapt from stone.
In Palestine the shepherds heard
the angel songs and sing them still.

One spoke to me the night
my father drowned in the river,
spoke soft as feathers,
said stone soars,
broke loose from the iron anchor
that tethers flesh and bone.

Life & Literature in '52

The writers hang out at Kenney's,
watch the massive Wurlitzer's
red, green, blue neon lights,
its automatic chrome turntable
spin round and round like their lives —
"Harbor Lights," "Slow Boat to China,'
and all the other ships that never sailed
from Iowa City. Drink beer,
read stories to each other,
quote Hemingway, think they *are* Hem
or Fitz; the girls are Charlotte,
Lady Brett, Zelda before she went mad.

Jane Austen, out of style,
waits for Thomas Hardy,
ashamed that she envies Torchy
who snuggles in the back booth
with a poet's hand on her knee.

Journey

The great white whale
eats its passage West;
see it come, parting the green sea
of grass, cutting *a* swath
half the width of the continent.
Grasses undulate before it,
riding his back, Cowboy Walt,
blue cambric work shirt,
red underwear showing at the open neck,
and hanging on the slippery
cream-colored back,
not scared, that effete and skinny
bastard, Edgar Allan.

Emily walks beside, basket over her arm,
cutting prairie lilies.
She knows this isn't her garden.

Sam, who writes the account of the journey
and sands it back East to the newspapers,
has his notebook in hand, his cigars,
his pocket flask,
And I come along, too,
because I cannot help it.
We crossed Ohio, Indiana, Illinois,
Missouri are halfway across Kansas,
blood on the belly of the whale now.

We will cross the mountains and come out
on the Pacific
at Russian Creek in California.
There the whale will slide into the water.

We will gather on the beach
to talk about the trail,
and always thereafter
define ourselves in terms
of the journey.

The Living & the Dead

Friends of My Childhood

I remember their courageous laughter
echoing down hospital corridors;
I see Lila San Domingo after
surgery, after radiation, more
alive than my friends back home at school. Snow
fell soft and deep that Winter — Shirley Byrd
diminished daily as she watched it grow.
Her mother never uttered the hard word
leukemia. Todd flirted with the nurses.
"After chemotherapy, no hair grew,"
his mom said. He whirled his wheelchair. Curses
locked his teeth. Friends of my childhood, you
keep your narrow rooms shut against spring's air.
Rain washes your bones. Grass grows from your
hair.

Hunter

for Dick Hugo

The muddy furrows hug my shoes.
The earth loves me and will not let me go.
Here is the wet smell of winter coming,
fine panes of ice lighting the puddles,
delicate crackle. Corn tassels trail
in dirt; cattails fuzz slow in the sharp wind.
The muskrats have rounded their houses;
they are sleek and fat. The blackbirds flock;
their chirping flowers the frozen sky.
The hawk sails, glides the updrafts,
watches the slight weaving in the grass,
falls like granite. The rabbit screams
by the pale rock. The geese come
at sundown, crying toward the marsh,
carried down the bloody sky;
the marsh wrinkles red. Wind whistles
through white feathers. They float
the cold water, weightless as angels.
I keep one hand on the dog.
The gun is heavy. We turn back
toward where we thought was home.

Erosion

His face was wrinkled from squinting
against the sun and hard times.
He sagged at the old dining room table.
Defeat was in his morning coffee
and despair in all the meat.

His fields outside
were furrowed by endless winds,
incessantly talking, like his wife,
high pitched, morning and evening.

The rains had torn
deep yellow gullies in the good soil.
The fields of the farm,
worn down to white and orange clay,
unbroken rocks, the elderly bones
of the earth showed through.
And he didn't get along with his son.

The old man was thin.
Yesterday he had been filled
with green-sprouting ideas
and the juice of life.
Now his knees shook when he walked.
He beat his fist
against the arm of his chair,
not knowing what terrible
thing had gone wrong,
nor when.

He said to the son,
"Don't farm, boy,
it don't pay.

Old Women at Church

Marcella prays silently for the man
who beat her, that he may not suffer in hell
any longer. "Twenty years is enough,
merciful mother, and I forgive him
except for the time he kicked me
and the baby was born thin and blue
like a coyote pup."

Rosita says prayers of thanksgiving.
The sheriff comes by asking for him
but he has not been back for ten years
and there is peace in the house and silence.
It smells of clean sand and dried strings
of peppers hanging from rafters. No more
bottle in the middle of the wild cards,
sick smell of whiskey and every man
with a knife or gun and short temper.

Old women dressed in black
beside adobe walls of the church
visit with each other while wind wraps
their long skirts against thin ankles.
They go home, cherishing their loneliness,
polishing it like smooth stones, strength
leaping inside the worn black shawls.

Electric Park

At Electric Park on Lost Island Lake
light bulbs hang on black cords
around the dance floor in the clearing
among the oaks along the shore, and accordions
play loud. Music moves past little cottages,
across dark water, down where pickerel swim
among the sunken pines, through the rib cage
of the Indian princess and her forbidden lover.
Here on the summer shore young men drink beer
for dancing courage and girls in flowered
dresses flock and reflock, looking
over their shoulders, shy. The wild guitars
croon and the girls move easy as water.
They kick off their shoes and dance on electric
feet.

The Watcher

"Who will die next?" my grandma said.
The Lutheran bells were tolling our dead
friend's years. Mother looked at her aghast,
embarrassed again. "Why?" she asked —
"why, no one!"
Grandma smiled and smoothed her gown
stubbornly. My mother was a town
girl. She wouldn't let my father
plant by the moon nor witch for water
"Yes," my grandma said, "death comes in threes."
She went outside to tell the bees.

The Watcher [Another version]

"Who will die next?" my Grandma said.
The Lutheran bells were telling our dead
Friend's years. My mother looked at her aghast
And embarrassed again. "Who?" she asked —
"Why, no one!"

Grandma smiled and smoothed her gown
Stubbornly. My mother was a town
Girl. She wouldn't let my father
Plant by the moon, nor witch for water.
"Yes," my Grandma said, "death comes in threes."
She looked through the windows, past the trees.

The Farmer

She knew that when the earth begins to close
in Fall, it takes some of its own along.
At any rate she found him by the rows
that he had sown, the dry and clattering corn.
And he was dead. She did not sigh nor weep.
All that was past her now, and she perceived
more clearly than before how chiseled deep
the granite of his face was— not relieved
by death, but rather set more rock-like still;
his marbled hands more veined; his flinty eyes
more cold. They stared unseeing past the hill.
The land had claimed its own kind, cold and wise,
and he was done with plowing pebbled loam.
She wondered when his heart had turned to stone.

Rollercoaster

In '59 Buddy Holly went down
in a frozen field after playing the Surf
in Mason City. Nothing went right that year.
The Thriller was condemned and torn down,
and after that a whole generation had to find
a flirtation with death somewhere else.

I remember the red and gold gondolas,
the grey kid who fastened the iron safety bar,
started the slow clatter
as electricity sucked us up the rails
laid on latticework scaffolding
that curved across the ballroom
and along the shore.

The local wags called it the Killer.
Every summer some alcoholic, some distraught housewife,
some invincible kid who thought he could live forever
would go out in style, leaping from the top;
their wails hang in the air forever
like icicles — broken from the throat
at the first plunge over the precipice,
like first sex, brilliant and brutal.
The ghosts of dead drunks dance on ghostly hills;
the steel rails shine across the dark,
riding toward paradise and terror.

Ambition

I saw the land hungry for them,
voracious for their breath and their flesh,
watching for their bones to turn granite.
And I saw you recognize the adversary and fight,
saying, "I'll wring every blade and every kernel
that can be threshed out of it."
Bill Grady, the neighbor, drove his beat-up pick-up
into town, had a beer or two in the pool hall, let the weeds
and pheasants have his fence lines and feed lots.
Maynard Haynes sat on his porch and looked out
toward the creek and gave up to the thistles and sunflowers.
But you would not give up, and sooner or later
the earth closed its dark teeth and swallowed all of you,
and what is the difference now?

Poor Girl

She had eaten poverty
and grown thin on the never-ending
bowls of it, heaped empty at the table.
She hated the rancid-lard smell of it,
and the gritty, cold feel of it.
It was winter, and the windows stuffed with rags.

Later she watched a rosy stove,
and little flames lighting the isinglass windows.
She smoothed her red silk apron
and sat down at the big white table,
and dished up chicken, and gravy,
and mashed potatoes, and plenty.

At the other end of the table
there were still empty
bowls of other shapes and colors
she hadn't even
noticed before.

Note

A slightly different version appeared in *Poetry Bag* 1: 6, Winter 1967-8.

The Root and the Vine

Having come to the final
harvest, and knowing that soon he would be shelled
out of the wrinkled pod,
he looked for something to wrap
his dry tendrils round, but all his stakes
were rotted. Well, he had had other
things to do besides talk to his children,
his neighbors, so there was no one left
but the woman who had been treated
like a stranger in her own home
all those years. Now he
clung to her hand.

Note

A slightly different version appeared in *Fine Arts Discovery* Winter 1967.

On the Death of My Father

The wind, hungry for trees,
shakes the grass, roars
Buffalo! Buffalo! Buffalo!
Shadowed by black hills,
they paw their fenced pasture,
nostrils wide, hump heavy.
Buffalo wind, I have planted corn
and sun-baked squash vines.
I opened the earth's black wounds,
black mouths testify, bleed grey.
The sun hangs down, a bare bulb.
Put your ear to the ground,
hear thunder:
across the great plains of America
the phantom buffalo
shake the grass like earthquake,
like any man's death.

Ancestors

Oh, what distinguishes between the quick
and dead? It is not silence. I have heard
the soft persistent murmurs falling thick
and comforting, and I have been assured
they know. They weep with me. They understand
for they have stood and searched the darkened glass
as I stand now, unsteady in the sand.
They danced upon the meadows. The morass
I sink in, they explored. They are the dead
whose names and times I do not even know,
who sipped champagne or ate a sullen bread.
They stand together, lingering in the glow.
They see how black a sheep I am, how wild
a heart I have. They wait, and they have smiled.

Bread Rising
for Mary Mel's baby

She sees the bread rise in the bowl
beneath the white cloth,
round and taut as her pregnant belly,
like the round white sheep grazing
near the round white boulders
on the rocky pastures of Maine
beside the dark Atlantic.
The baby rises with its own salt tides,
swims in its own sea, part and apart,
as mysterious and magical
as the bread increasing in the bowl.

Planting the Sand Cherry

Today I planted the sand cherry with red leaves —
and hope that I can go on digging in this yard,
pruning the grape vine, twisting the silver lace
on its trellis, the one that bloomed
just before the frost flowered over all the garden.
Next spring I will plant more zinnias, marigolds,
straw flowers, pearly everlasting, and bleeding heart.
I plant that for you, old love, old friend,
and lilacs for remembering. The lily-of-the-valley
with cream-colored bells, bent over slightly, bowing
to the inevitable, flowers for a few days, a week.
Now its broad blade leaves are streaked with brown
and the stem dried to a pale hair.
In place of the silent bells, red berries
like rose hips blaze close to the ground.
It is important for me to be down on my knees,
my fingers sifting the black earth,
making those things grow which will grow.
Sometimes I save a weed if its leaves
are spread fern-like, hand-like,
or if it grows with a certain impertinence.
I let the goldenrod stay and the wild asters.
I save the violets in spring. People who kill violets
will do anything.

Uncollected Poems

Accident

Husks caught in the corn-picker, stopped,
power running, cogs caught,
comes loose fast, fingers eaten,
a soft pulp pulled out.

In my dreams
the stump hands run after me,
back me into impossible corners, caressing,
the lost fingers groping over me,
disgusted, screaming.

They hold out their stump arms to shake hands
with me, laughing.
Amos Baedke has an empty cuff,
Herman Gumm, an iron hook, cold
in winter. Somewhere in us
despair mutilates us all, some
like me, in secret places.

Note

Text from this poem appears in two others:
"Amputees" and "Corn Picking."

Acupuncture Treatment

The acupuncture needles in my back
tingle slightly; I relax, dream, and doze
while scenes of lovely places drift and tack,
return like boats through my consciousness, those
I saw, those painters knew — a pregnant sea
where shell-born Venus floated, blown by winds,
waves flower-sprinkled by Botticelli —
courtyard clay pots of cacti in Athens —
two workmen in blue smocks by a stone wall
in Paris, drinking lunch (some pain escapes
through the small apertures) — the sky at Arles,
Van Gogh's, still swirls, loneliness as vast, great
space. He was on the edge where no one hears.
Because of him I won't cut off my ear.

Addressing the Clouds

We have given you names without permission,
yet you drift, scud, scutter, fly, rocket across
the ether, like the sky which does not
really exist, despite its blue disguise.

All your mysterious processionals,
your mutating shapes melting, melding, modifying,
changing, trying new forms and combinations
without editorial guidance or engineering acumen.

Despite grammarians, great writers of books,
bellicose editors, pundits of the talking heads,
scientists of renown, you sail on unperturbed
by their excellent pronouncements.

Advice from Two Hemispheres
For Melody Ann at Seventeen

Beauty is strong, athletic, fair,
And you are lovely though beauty's a curse
As well as boon. Don't let the doomsters scare
You saying beauty fades fast. Lies. The worst

Of them, urging you to fall into their
Waiting arms before you grow wrinkled, old,
Before it's too late, your teeth gone, your hair
Grown bald —they have their own agenda. Hold

Your own counsel, keep your own time. Love slips
And slides; its wily, and unwise. The young
Can change in two weeks, two nights, two
seconds,
Don't chart your course by fickle moon or sun

That dazzles your eyes. No, keep your compass
Set by the North Star or the Southern Cross.

After the Party's Over

At the Community Center dance
for senior citizens, I stumble into a jitterbug,
creak through a waltz, shuffle a two-step,
and think about my mother, long dead,
who reminisced about dances in the neighborhood
farm houses when she was young, a fiddler,
rugs rolled up, winter coats piled on the bedroom bed,
my father and his brothers crashing the party,
already drinking from the bottles in their hip pockets,
Uncle Hansel picks a fight and they have to take it outside,
my Dad and his four other brothers follow
because Hansel's enemy also has his friends,
and they brawl, bloody knuckles, black eyes,
half the fun. Maybe they nip
another swig, return to dance with the girls;
my father discovers my mother who dances with him
although she does not approve, but he's so handsome,
so dare-devil. Now his sweat says I am victorious,
dangerous, desirable. And she hears all of it.

"The Air Is Wild with Leaves"
September 11, 2001

Le vrai peut quelquefois n'etre pas vraisemble

A man of no particular height or physiognomy,
of no particular description carries his rake,
a pointed stick, a canvas bag across the quad.

Distant buzz from the interstate, voices
of students, sky delphinium-blue, only a stray cloud
or two on their cloud highways.

He rakes sycamore leaves larger than my hand,
small Japanese maple's pointed red fingers,
whistles amid the "famous harmony of leaves."

In New York two skyliners forced into skyscrapers
"to shatter the leaves before the mellowing year."
Fingers, thumbs, arms, legs are falling,

a shoe with a foot in it, what we among the leaves
have never known. "Slowly the Bible of the race is writ,
And not on paper leaves nor leaves of stone."

The green pinions of the black willow turn
"crisped and sere — the leaves they are withering and sere."
It is lovely blue September of "this immemorial year."

Now leaves of life keep falling. One man clings
to the side of the tower, ninety stories up, an insect
against the stem. Oh, God, he can't hang on.

I cannot get my mind around this Fall. Church bells peal,
"We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree.
And wither and perish, but naught changeth thee."

Oh, I am staggering, we are all staggering through drifted piles
of sorrow and despair. The yard man keeps collecting.
I recognize him. You know him, too, where the scraps

of this country's innocence scatter like papers
from the great buildings' offices floating down
over the towered city with ".. .all that lamentation of the leaves."

All the Lost Places

Farm house, tumbled down, blown away,
house on Morningside Avenue
demolished for a parking lot
where I kissed a college boy on the steps,
on the swing, beside the lilacs,
everlasting, ever-lilac spring.
Oh. sweet boy who serenaded me
when he was a little drunk.

Crescent beach at Unawatuna,
tsunami swirled into the Indian Ocean —
a rage of currents' watery lips,
gulping the coral reef,
turtle incubator.
girl selling batik
on the sand.
swept away.

Aleppo suq shelled by Isis
set afire where the Bedouins bought
sheepskin cloaks, leather dyed vermillion,
tent straps, hand woven carpets from Ali Baba
spices., nuts., seeds, soap
rows of gold bracelet,
wedding dresses,
wafting through the mortar holes.

I am witness.
I was there.
    The dear, demolished places,
    still showing sparks,
    still glowing in the dark,
    Spangled and iridescent.

All the Signs Say Caution,
but You Don't Read Them

Now green lace of spring
now black limbs covered
in white rosettes,
rain comes down in spangles
in iridescent falls
the brook wanders,
the cow' cream turns gold,
the butter bright golden,
the birds sing love, love,
bees hum love, love, love.

You cannot trust the weather.
It snows on daffodils
and violets. It rains on Jack-in-the-pulpit,
filling the chalice, drowning poor Jack.
The brook dries up, the field withers,
the cow goes dry, and even love will betray you.
nevertheless it is still love for whatever it's worth.

Always the Light

The star people are all thin;
they couldn't travel fast if they were fat.
They eat lightly, Chinese take-out
and Vietnamese on the Rue des Italiens.
They love Paris for the light that shines clearly,
as it did in the days of prismatic color
before the post-Edenic haze.
They revere Greece for the light on white marble,
"It's always the light," they say,
gazing at the Venus de Milo.

They travel to Gaziantep to see
the outdoor sculpture school
of the ancient Hittites-
find what they knew they'd find:
light so fine it might have been strained honey.
They know why the sculptors took their tools
and left suddenly, leaving great blocks of stone
unfinished, but they don't tell secrets.
They eat their *ch'ao mien,* their sweet and sour
    pork,
their pressed duck. Sometimes when no one is
    looking,
they lick their fingers.

Amateur Climber

I think I should not read the masters.
The great story tellers are Mt. Fuji, the Matterhorn,
Everest. Let me read some small, simple story,
Even a flawed one which may be a round hill,
Some ancient tell, a small promontory that I can
    climb.
I'll stand there and gaze ahead at the great
    mountains
Blue and beautiful, unattainable
In the fine mist of distance.

Amnesty

for Napoleon, amnesty for blood
on the Russian snow,
amnesty for Jefferson Davis, that impossible
dreamer,
cool amnesty for Sherman, for fair-haired
Custer, for Sitting Bull, for Chamberlain,
(his black umbrella did not shield us), for Lt.
Calley,
for pilots who defoliated rice paddies or bombed
hospitals,
for soldiers who poisoned wells, for Henry
Kissinger
who believed the war should wind down slowly in
order
not to irritate the right wing, God who will not
suffer a witch to live, we walk around in good
health,
recover from phlebitis, yearn to be elder
statesmen,
covet bigger cars, our neighbor's everything, and
comfort, sweet comfort

Amputees

In my dreams they run after me,
hold out their stump arms
to shake hands, laughing. Amos Baedke
has an empty cuff, Herman Gumm
an iron hook, cold in winter.
Harold Dubinsky, black leather glove
like an old Nazi.
Corn picker, mechanical auger, hay chopper
are hungry for flesh. Despair, even hungrier,
mutilates us all — some like me
in secret places.

Appetite for Reminders

Since love no longer feeds my appetite,
now I eat corporeal food, return to world's
enormous desolation — rabbits bite
the buds off flowers, snack on ferns unfurled.
impartial sun shines down, oblivious
to pain, and scorns the words I wish I'd said.
Relentless dandelions bloom and floss;
I watch the robins bathe, splashing their heads;
no comfort in the fountain's plaintive plink
finches' twitter. I survey my boxwood
paths, try to read my books on ancient Greeks.
"Forget," I say, "what's gone is gone for good."

You are six feet tall, I'm reminded still —
along the garden fence, by six-foot dill.

Apple Orchard

At the branches farthest tips
tight pink buds break brown casques,
leaves stretch their fingers,
expand like green stars;
twigs' tracery stitches it
into lace.

Standing in the middle of the orchard
I burst into blossoms;
white petals erupt
from my fingertips,
delicate red stamens
stain my mouth. Oh, bees,
Come, Come.

Arbor Swing

Light falls green
between
grape leaves,
illumines

dusty globes.
Birds know,
perch, probe
Concord blood.

A child swings,
spits dreams,
eats fruit.
Burgeoning

innocence
ferments
under
purple scent.

The Arborist

He comes to prune hackberry and oak,
tosses his ropes over a limb, pulls himself up
in his harness and roams the treetops,
lops off dead branches, sawing and shaping.
But the work is just an excuse to
sway with the rhythm of the wind
above it all, to take the view
of a spectator who looks
at the world like a bird.
I think he doesn't want to come down.

Arms

Dorothy Christiansen had plump white arms.
My arms were skinny, my fingers, sticks.
Gerry Lee HiIdensheimer , the most
popular girl in the sixth grade,
always knew when I put my hands over her eyes
and said, "Guess who?" She despised
those bony fingers. Dorothy Christiansen's
mother always called her darling.
My mother never called me anything
except my flat name, and I envied
Dorothy those round arms.

Note

Published in *The Mississippi Valley Review of Literature*

At Great Spirit Lake

The grey buds dropped off
after the hard freeze last spring,
so now autumn is without
the sweet smells of rotting fruit,
the flies buzz aimlessly.

The wind out of Dakota has worried
the lake all summer. No ducks nested,
The fish didn't bite.

But after the sun goes,
there is a light
that comes from the water.

Atmospheric Residue from Mt. St. Helens, 1982
(for my mother)

Ten pm and still light —
the blue heron fishes the shallows,
his knees bend backwards.
A clutch of fishing boats bob on gilded waves.
The August sky over Little Spirit Lake
burns magenta, cerise, vermillion, coral,
the color of coals alive in the grate.

I know one who yesterday
sailed into lakes of color,
fishes hidden ponds for stranger treasure,
and I believe that dust and ashes
can light up the sky.

At the Lake

Sun comes up through fog
over the lake, golden pointillist.
In the Northeast, sifting toward peach,
In the South, blue in the West
on the oak tree bank.

Nine a.m. Sunday

two vacationing Lutheran pastors fishing*
drink beer, smoke cigars.

No boats. The kid who fished
from the bank every morning
Is gone. Drowned last year.

Somewhere far off a rain dove cries.
No other sounds except a tumult
of regrets rattling around in my brain pan.

Monday After the Fourth of July

Lake flat. Not a ripple even five miles
to the other side. So still I hear two slaps in the water*
as the pelican, eleven docks away, takes off.

Note

Struthers added by hand "fishing" and "in the water" to these lines. Another note inked on the page reads "at first whisper" and perhaps "put in turtle poem."

At the University of Louisville

I gaze out of my window at the lawn,
the pines, the campus beyond,
and one grey pigeon perched
on the edge of the enormous concrete box
that is the library. Spring sun
falls on one pines, the dry grass,
the bare ground. I know this is not
Minneapolis, not Ames, not Chicago.
The direction of the pine needles'
compass says South. Random winds
push last year's leaves east, than west.
What have poets to offer but observation,
the kindly light of attention, love
for the earth?

Aunt Clemmie's Pictures

Aunt Clernmie takes out her picture albums,
lays them on our bored laps;
the smiles of all the vaguely remembered cousins
and all the grandchildren we never hope to see
stare up from the black, flat pages.
She is baking a raspberry pie
despite the summer heat in the neat little house,
She brews coffee after we had seen
the graduation shots of Larry Dean in '71;
of his first car, a clunker; his old dog,
its tongue out from its mouth,
panting through all these summers,
and its white ruff, smooth and shiny.
"Larry Dean died of cancer," she says,
turning the page, and we try to smile
while we look at the wedding of Doris Rose.

Backpacks

After the January thaw,
this morning: freeze again.
Two students ahead of me,
carrying heavy backpacks,
almost slip on the black ice;
they put out their arms like birds
to keep their balance.
I put out my arms to save myself, too.

The grey sparrows beside the walk
who forage for weed seeds
have light, hollow bones,
tiny skulls almost weightless,
feathers innocent of archaeology,
statistics, macroeconomics. In today's world
our sins are not heavy and our responsibilities
to the next world do not weigh us down,
but our bones are heavy.
We carry burdens that do not lift us
and none of us can fly.

Basketball Wife

Thump, thump, thump, conjured
down the court, I am hoisted, turned, swirled,
faked, and finally from the outside, score.
Computer graphics light the board;
WOW! it flashes, WOW! WOW!
The opposition team, Reason, Common Sense,
Precaution,
Moderation, Mr. Inbetween, wearing black jerseys
tries to stop us, but you hold out your magnetized
hand
and I fall into your embrace, naturally, completely,
certain this game is the only game in town.
Last quarter nearly over,
surrounded by rowdy fans,
I fly through the ringing air,
am the object of everyone's attention,
but I obey only you,
leap through the hoop for your triumph.

Your name, your caricature lights the board;
the crowd cheers, cheers, cheers for you.
I am happy, a good, traditional wife.

Bathing Discreetly
Kandy, Sri Lanka

Train creeps snail-like up the mountain,
roadbed degraded, tracks rough.
All around ferocious green jungle,
its creatures hiding from the racket,
only a girl in a red sarong
bathing discreetly beneath a waterfall.

1/21/2011

Behind My Back

Dandelions, biannual, so I labor
every morning, stooping to pick
the blooms — these uninvited invaders!

Proud of my power, I turn my back
once I've murdered them all. But too quick!
Instantly they launch a sneak attack.

and two or three more burst their green calyxes,
emerge and flaunt their naughty golden faces.

Believing in April

The day wraps in its own package
    grey clouds bump against each other
push their shoulders against the wind
    pregnant with rock bands, trumpets
and drums, rain waits in the mouth of the air
    grass greener than grass has ever been
 gives off its own green light
    fairy circles ring-around-the-rosy
erupt little bald toad stools
    trees stand at attention, mantillas of green lace
over their twiggy tops
    tulips hold out cups
begging grace to fill them
    with the spirit
Dandelions, dandelions,
    a riot of dandelions.

Explosion of robin song
    eruption of red cardinals
females grey as clouds
    heads down, peck at the earth
as if they don't hear the carols
    but they do, they do.

I see the forsythia's yellow flames
    small blue flags, emerging, blades first,
the larch shivers with last year's red cones
    small sweet bombs
rabbits nibble at the toes of the roses
    gophers emerge from their secret caves,
scurrying away the mist, whistling their secret
    signals
    lilacs shake in anticipation to take over the
    world
a moon, pale sugar cookie eaten by sunlight,
    and the purr of far off traffic
licks away
    the milk of the morning.

Bethany Beach, Delaware

I ride the painted horses, canter
smooth as water around the wooden track;
music wheezes old bellows,
the cymbal bangs, regular. Look out
on the flat sand, across the brass sea.
The delicate scent of crab sandwiches,
the salt smell of seaweed bladdered
In rows, dark ridges on the fine-fingered
shore.

I have never gone back. The bay bridge
arches Its steel across Chesapeake.
The ferries are foundered. Their hulks
rot. The wooden horses warp,
and the seaweed stinks.

You can only go back so far
before you come to the salt.

Note

A note on the page reads: to be published in
Greenfield Review

Biloxi, Mississippi

Jefferson Davis, white hope of the South,
sent your wife to Paris after the war
to buy mahogany furniture for the house
at Biloxi. Its rich redness darker
than blood at Manassas, blackened now,
still polished like the black arms of slaves.

Gulf winds caress your veranda,
the Spanish tide comes up on the white beach,
casts shells, their purple interior dark
as the holds of sunken galleons, gone down
in fifty fathoms, gone down like lost
causes. The palm trees on your beach,
Jeff Davis, fringe the wind, and your
live oaks are hung with grey moss.

Birth of a Daughter

He is there in the hospital room
before the delivery, saying, "Relax,
breathe deeply, don't panic," becoming
an expert in childbirth,
telling me how to do it when I had
done it without him twice before.
Yes, Slyvia, we love the boot in the face,
the obstetrician's knife,
the hand that holds ours while the wrench turns
in the guts,
while this ten-pound beach ball bounces
against my muscles, tries to turn them inside out
rams its way through the funnel's tunnel
centimeter by centimeter.
Guilty, I condemn myself, for not resisting
him, warm in the morning bed, saying,
"Just a little bit. You don't have to reach
for that stuff," grabbing my hand and kissing it,
pushing against me. Guilty of giving in
said the jury of nurses. Guilty of being
a bad patient who cries and wants to scream.
But their white eyes won't let me. Guilty,
the white-robed doctor, pronounced, proved,
pulled back the white sheet and looked at the
waters,
broken and flooding the bed. Guilty of all
the filthy excrescence of woman.

And I think, what can they do,
these poor men? They cannot do
what is the real business of the world.
A moment's pleasure, nine months ago,
not even remembered — the clear, pungent
semen
spent and that's all.
But I felt you first, a butterfly,
a small bird, then a pony kicking;
I knew you asleep or awake, stretching,
swimming,
turning summersaults in that small, salt sea,
and I sang to you like the mermaids sing,
and you heard me.
Then you burst out of that socket, squalling
a healthy squall and they lay you
in a little iron crib beside me. We look
at each other long and long.
There is a smear of my clean blood
across your forehead, and I see
you are beautiful, blest,
full of innocent power.
You are the new person, the green shoot,
water in the wasteland.
You are the perfect poem that I have grown,
and your every cry is lyric.

Blizzard

Push against white darkness
footprints' soft mouths close
behind us
insistent desire to stop and rest
is false mother comfort
the wind blows
black will best
us if we stop later
peel off frozen clothes
stiff courage what matters
is persistence luck
we came in whole
not changed much.

Blood of My Blood

My sister, Dee Dee, and I opened
The door of the feed room.
The quick sunlight showed
Two rats
On the feed-strewn floor.
For a minute they stared
At us. Dee Dee grabbed the scoop shovel
And hit them with its sharp
Edge. I turned my back and went
And leaned against the manger.
I could hear the rats screaming
And crying.

Dee Dee came out carrying
The bloody shovel.
"They're dead," she said.
She looked at me
Scornfully.

Blurred Edges

I like blurred edges,
the uncertain place where land ends
and marsh begins;
a path disappearing, leaking, squishing,
more and more soggy
and great hummocks of grass begin to hump
themselves around pools of water;
the way winter melts
into spring, not all at once,
night still freezing a transparent skin
across the bird bath, but a blatant sun
daring the winds
still bluffing out of Canada;
the continuing cascade of leaves
in autumn, as if they could never stop falling;
the way fire expires, covered with grey ash,
yet holding a warm spark beneath its overcoat;
The deckle edges of old books which say,
this is not the whole story,
this is never the complete story.
You have to live the rest of it.

Boat Rides

Vivian, Mel, and I ride with Roger
in his Chris-Craft, 15 horse Johnson.
We circle the shore of Spirit Lake slowly.
Then Roger opens the throttle and we skim
across open water, no destination, no goal,
Just speed.* A boat proves that Roger is not tied
to earth, can move on other elements,
Bow, stern, the Johnson churning,
Proof! Proof! Proof!

A year later, Roger's dead.
Cancer, and now he's another element.

Note

"Just" is capitalized in the typescript.

Bones

The Russians stole the bones of Adolf Hitler
and Eva Braun and hid them.
Napoleon's bones are safe inside seven
sarcophagi. Seven layers of stone
keep enemies out and thieves.
The skeleton at Washington High
has short legs, one front tooth
missing, hard knocks, the female symbol
on the curved pelvis, rounded, dished out
for childbirth, a bone cradle.
Lady,
we know your bones, more useful
than Napoleon's, more valuable than Hitler's,
do not ache for the dark grave.
Those who rock death
envy your glass case,
bright-lighted, clean.

Brain

My right hand has betrayed me,
a nerve or more dead after shingles,
my grasp incomplete.
Still, I walk and talk, although my friend Paul
the brilliant engineer, has Alzheimer's,
now curled up in the fetal position
in the nursing home, and Chuck is confused,
Eudra cannot travel, back pain from cancer.
After her stroke beautiful Leeta works cross-word
puzzles.
The old psychiatrist learning French again.
Will language study protect him?

Oh brains, so fragile, so unpredictable,
so vulnerable, why do you flee
the round bone boxes? why collapse, stray?
Oh brain stay with me yet a little longer.
Stay.

Brakes

Its long metal legs, bolted
to the plank platform,
iron throat drilled into the thick earth.
It lifts high its giant galvanized blades
that spin with the wind.

When the sky storms
I run out through runnels of rain
to set its brake,
fighting its strength as I tie it down
to save the great clunking fan
which resists being saved
but wants to fly off into the night.

I, the traitor, ache for it,
because I, too, am fastened to this place,
dying to blow away with any wind,
sail off in any dim, distant direction.

Breaking Stones

Teeth, hands, break these stones.
Make them spill their secrets,
disclose their magic dust,
empower the one who carries them
out of the dunes
where the lake licked them
into the house of poetry
while reason rails outside,
and science throws fits.

I clutch them in my palms,
my lodestones, my Rosetta stones,
my thundermouths. O stones,
if you were only my heart

Bring Back

for Tom King (1964-2003)

In Louisiana's woods,
clearing white sunlight checkered
in minnowy cypress swamps:
there was drum, room-loom drilling
of Ivory-billed wood-pecker!

Dogwood, rhododendron hood
the old round mountains, oak, sweet
gum, Johnny-jump-up by damp
springs, and hidden there, trilling:
Carolina parakeet!

Oh, I'd bring them back, I would
bring gray passenger pigeons,
their great shadows darkening maps
from Canada south, filling
skies, flying slower than widgeons.

I'd entice them from their wood-
en sleep. I'd revive most dear
friends, light mausoleum lamps,
lead the dead, renewed, willing,
Lazarus-like into spring air.

Brother and Sister

I see my brother becoming my father,
a Legionnaire, an Am-Vet, too,
spends Thanksgiving Day serving dinner
at the old soldier's home,
does not notice how his wife makes do
without affection.

I see myself becoming my mother,
busy building the carapace
that insulates from the husband;
All appendages protected,
except the invisible ones.

Tell me what happened to us children
who saw the first picture —
those two ghosts who lost each other
before they found the third body
they should have inhabited?
Tell me, where did we go wrong?
Where lost and crying?

Cassandra Listens to News of Hurricanes

I didn't know that rivers
could be dry until I was taken to Tucson.
By then all my rivers had dried up, too,
as well as the seas, but I still had the air.

Oh, air of incredible brightness,
that glistens the desert,
that drinks the rivers
of water and the soul.

I tell you until the thirsty
the hungry, the homeless
have water, food, shelter,
there will be dry rivers
and great storms, and plagues.
But you will not understand
won't mend the rift, oh, the chasm, in your ways,
and you will see cataclysm after cataclysm
so desperate you will wish for Armageddon
that is still a long time coming.

Chances

You know about the rain
And where it falls, likewise snow,
And radiation,
And varieties of pain.

Life makes no contract, locks
Capricious wisdom
Beyond pondering
Of this poor bone box.

Should the white rose rot?
The jade bowl break?
Who told you life was fair?
Be assured, it is not.

Note

Published in *Fine Arts Discovery,* Winter 1967.

Charlotte's Veil

When Uncle Elwood died in jail,
alcohol poisoning the sheriff explained,
the funeral was held at our house.
Mama put the Bible out on the library table,
taking it down from atop the piano, dusting it off,
When I asked her why, she said,
"It will make people feel better."
I couldn't see that it did. All the aunts cried.
All the uncles went outside and smoked
and stood around and couldn't talk much.
Daddy, angry for weeks didn't hear
a thing the preacher said. Aunt Imogene
had a few things to say about Elwood's wife,
Charlotte, who had called the sheriff
for her protection, she said. Charlotte
hid behind her black veil,
clutched her little blond boy and no one
could see what her face looked like.
I thought, Good for you, Charlotte.
Don't let them see whatever is there — love, hate,
remorse, revenge, fear, alcoholism,
self-satisfaction, despair. Don't give them
the satisfaction.

Cherry Trees

Grandfather grafted stems of exotic fruit
onto wild roots, a skill he learned
in the old country where he had been apprenticed
to a nurseryman. One spring when the cherry
trees
bloomed white lace, held a million bees
in their filmy hair, my mother, looking at them,
cried. She wouldn't say why, only wiped her eyes
and went back to the kitchen. Summer came
and nubs, hard as rocks, became cherries, green,
but burgeoning. Robins, blackbirds kept watch.
Mother tied foil pie pans to lower branches.
Finally harvest — Wisconsin Reds, Pie Cherries,
sweetest of all, its black juice running down my
face
and fingers, the one Grandfather loved best,
Oxheart.

Choice

In Huron,
South Dakota, there is the wind, tearing
the cottonwoods, sucking the water
out of the ground, blowing the rain
out of the sky,
and forever talking, screaming, cursing,
even in the night whispering
senile obscenities
through the cracks in the window.

Take him in and corrosion
will start in your chest. Take in any
everyday, screaming thing and the rot begins.
You do not have to listen.
Sleep, and if you cannot,
plug your ears, or puncture
your eardrums.

You do not have to open the door.

Note

Published in *Poetry Bag* and in *The Fault*

Christ's Hometown

At Shingo, Japan, two ancient graves.
The old keeper tells me that one
is Jesus' grave, the other,
the grave of his brother,
After young Jesus studied eleven years
with the Zen master here,
he returned to Judea for his ministry.
When the mistaken Romans crucified
his brother, Jesus took his ashes,
escaped through Siberia,
came back to Japan where he married
the shy Mujuho, fathered three daughters,
died of natural causes at age 106.
There Is no doubt he lived here:
this is a village of good vegetables
where typhoons never hit. All the babies
in the neighborhood have a cross
drawn on their foreheads in ashes
for good luck. It is unfortunate that
the ancient, scroll, which testified
to everything, was lost In the war's bombings.

Class Distinctions

The landscaper says it's a weed tree,
its wood soft, licked up fast
in fireplaces, not much heat in it,
no sap for syrup, no quilt of colors
in the fall.

But it carries its shade as well
as its betters, exudes its share
of cooling moisture in summer,
consumes its measure of carbon dioxide.
Look, it's lovely in its own green loveliness.
Robins do not despise it nor squirrels,
and I will not condemn it nor replace it
with some more fashionable tree. If it
shatters easily (it does), if its roots creep
into my sewer line (they do), I will put up
with its eccentricities. I, who have eccentricities
of my own, and weaknesses, too,
one of the weed people.

Cloud Appreciation Society

The Cloud Appreciation Society
posts photos of their darlings: Nimbo-Stratus,
Cirrus-Fibratus, defends the Mammatus'
bruised dark, overhanging pouches, claims
they do not bring tornadoes,
They love: a growing Cumulus tower,
the Billow cloud that could be a sky dragon,
the Orthographic and the Pileus
(Latin for skullcap) that attaches itself
to a peak.
The great artists have known the skyscapes
for centuries, Jacob van Ruisdael's *The Windmill at Wyk*
three-fourths of the canvas for stratocumulus,
and Georgia O'Keeffe's *Sky Above Clouds IV.*

You can become desperate in cities' canyons,
or in the black valleys of Great Mountains,
or in Arabia's deep desert declivities
where no cloud appears, except once every four years —
to look up at a sky bereft,
a plain, glaring desert of sky,
no great panorama, no clouds changing the subject,
painting themselves, erasing themselves
like happenstance
like *if*
like life
on the largest canvas of all.

The Cloud Appreciation Society
[Another version]

Three fourths of the canvas for skyscapes,
for stratocumulus on Jacob van Ruisdael's
The Windmill at Wyk. "... Almost in shape
like a camel," "By the mass, 'tis a camel indeed."
As variable as Hamlet's brain,
like a weasel (Polonius himself), like a whale.
".. .never the same for two moments together"
Ruskin says, "...intended for our perpetual
pleasure."
Horsetail clouds (Cirrus — high level — thin and
white)
"Rain in three days," when Fred Mohr read
the clouds, "except in times of drought
when all signs fail."

The Cloud Appreciation Society
posts photos of their favorites: Nimbo-Stratus,
Cirrus-Fibratus, defending the Mammatus'
dark, overhanging pouches, claiming
they do not bring tornadoes,
They love: the Orthographic,
that must have mountains, the Pileus
(Latin for skullcap) that attaches itself
to a mountain or a growing Cumulus tower,
and the Billow Cloud that could be a sky dragon.

Georgia O'Keeffe, flies above the clouds
sees stepping stones from New York to Taos,
stretches a canvas on her garage wall,
paints from first light until last light,
pale sunrise at the top from a ladder,
the middle (Cumulus from above),
on a platform as she works her way down the
canvas,
she sits on a table, a box, the small Mexican chair,
finally on her knees on the earth.
Her largest painting.

"The sky," Ruskin says, "...perpetual comfort
and exalting of the heart..."

You could become desperate in cities' canyons,
or in the black valleys of Great Mountains,
or in Arabia's deep desert declivities
where no clouds appear, except once every four
years,
to never look up in daylight,
or to look up at a sky bereft of clouds,
a plain, glaring desert of sky,
no great panorama, no clouds changing the
subject,
painting themselves, and erasing themselves
on the largest canvas of all.

CNAs at Senior Rehab

Molly
Kindness precedes her,
a wave washing toward my bed,
a missing tooth, cell phone pics
of grand kids. One of them
looks like an angel.

May Rose
pushes my wheel chair,
oxygen loaded like a missile on its back,
nose piece: uncomfortable paren-
thesis for my lazy lungs. Filipina,
massages my back with pure pity,
jasmine lotion, the scent of home.

Island Girl
sun-brown arms, Micronesia eyes,
cajoles an old man to swallow his pills.
She dances a few steps, pats him on the shoulder
almost a hug. So obvious, so transparent,
the whole dining room sees through it,
loves it, smiles at a little subterfuge,
a little light from the tropics so far away.

Senior Citizen Rehab Center, Morning, Dining
Room,

Isabel,
her hands in the air, fly off,
scatter, flutter about her silver hair,
birds with no nest.

Duane
holds his neck,
back of his head,
trying to hold the past together,
keeping what he used to know
from escaping completely.

Pat
tosses out random words,
beads of speech
from a broken string.

Hamilton,
old IRS agent can no longer
add or speak; one foot amputated.
deaf, too. He no longer taxes
anyone.

Cold Nights

At night the frost came in
    when wind shook the old
windows. but we were warm beneath a fur robe,
    the skin of a horse rode over us.

Cold Questions

What will lead you back
to these patient hills, immaculate woods
where a shout brings down snowfalls?
Footprints begin from nowhere,
raccoon dropped from the skies?
rabbit erupted from the earth's core?
They disappear into nothingness,
into the pale mist daubing away at the horizon.

Cougar hides, deer shy among the pines,
snow angels invisible. Crow writes black words
on the glassy air.
Ice says world is hard.
Crow says clean up death.
Wind says live or die — I don't care.

Oh dear one, what do you say?
I have carried the stones to build the fireplace,
cemented them in place, cemented the tall
chimney,
gathered wood and laid the fire.
The rug is sheepskin, pillows goose down.
The animals have come in to us.
Oh love, what do you say?

Colder and Wiser

The Pleiades are called to California
to make a movie, but when they arrive,
sliding down the hills that spell
    H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D,
they discover it's a pornographic film,
and they demur. They go surfing at Malibu,
ski at Bear Mountain, visit Marilyn Monroe's grave
at Westwood Memorial Park,
and return to their allotted spaces, colder and
    wiser,
and more distant.

College Hangout, Fifty Years Later

Memory finds the old coffee shop,
clapboards scaling, sagging screen door
banging, summer and winter,
replaced
by a bright, clean McDonalds —

Miss Mills won't drink from a mug.
They keep a China cup and saucer
for her Victorian sensibilities.
We writers and would-be writers crowd in the dark
    booths,
trade lies above the black brew's steam.
We say witty things.
We are young and beautiful —
the boys from Indo China work behind the counter,
slim as reeds and handsome,
their hands delicate, but sure with the coffee pots,
the creamers and sugar bowls.
I wonder if their grandsons died
in Saigon or in some unknown village
where America lost her innocence.

O Miss Mills, Kipling was already dead,
Forster was not enough, Conrad tried to tell us,
but you led us deeper into the jungle.

I wish I could remember the laughter,
I wish I could remember the names.

Congressional Candidate

"Once I accused myself, now I excuse, in fact
I rate myself quite highly now." I once
was penitent when teacher called me dunce
and caviled. How'd he know I hadn't cracked

the text? Then I'd apologize. He'd shout
dire threats — he was a rotten apple, bored
by worms. I was merely bored. Stuff stored
in his bald head was too arcane. Old lout

didn't dream of my future great success
at concocting the most plausible lie,
or my hard hatred of the intellect.
I started out with a used car business,
but turned my skills to politics when I
discovered my blood brothers were red necks.

Corn Picking

In my dreams
the stumps run after me,
back me into impossible corners, caressing,
the lost fingers groping over me,
disgusted, screaming.

Husks caught in the corn-picker, stopped,
power running, cogs caught,
comes loose fast, fingers eaten,
a soft pulp pulled out.

They hold out their stumps to shake hands
with me, laughing.
Amos Baedke has an empty cuff,
Herman Gumm an iron hook, cold
in winter. Somewhere in us
despair chops slow. Mutilates us all, some
like me, in secret places.

Cricks

The East can have their
mealy-mouth creeks
but here in the Middle of the country
the Middle of the world
we have cricks.
Cricks don't saunter along weakly,
they turn, return, bend, bow, ox-bow,
scribble, chatter over rocks,
tinkle, construct small pools
where they hide moss agates.
Come fall they sigh, rest, rest.
In winter they lock their treasures tight
Cricks spread blue wings in spring,
let you know they're still flowing
their own way. In summers,
under the cottonwoods the patient cattle
come down to stand in the cool water.

Cruising Lake Okoboji

Two Mercurys drone.
Lake falls away beneath the bow.
Little fishermen's shacks
along the shore have been razed
for vacation homes for the rich.
Even the ghosts of Indian women
no longer dig the cat tail roots
from the shallows to roast in the campfire.
The water—dark blue and emerald
is spangled with lunettes
the size of silver dollars.
Near the shore at Gull Point
we glide through an Impressionist
painting. The picture recomposes itself
instant by instant behind us
as if our presence, our absence
meant nothing.

Customize

He had
Spider hub caps
with black and white checkers
locking kit behind center cap
plus
the Marvel Spider-Man
steering wheel cover,
black with red spiders.

He had
Mossy Oak Pink Camouflage Neoprene
steering wheel cover
and
Fiesta 3-Bar Spinner
hub caps
plus
Hot Rod Mirrors
in the shape of the Maltese Cross.

How could she choose?

Dances

When Charlie Perkins played the fiddle
for neighborhood dances — the living room rug
rolled up, chairs against the walls,
our coats piled on the bedroom bed —
he called up music so sweet
that I smelled lilies-of-the-valley, lilacs
on Purple Hill, wild pink June roses.
Round Pond's mouth frozen shut, only silence
from ice-gagged river, but he made the water
chatter, lap mossy banks.
Cottonwood leaves scattered under burdens of
snow, frost-petrified,
but he made their satin tongues
slip against each other, whispering, gossiping,
and the huge hand of Jorg Jorgensen
on my waist while we danced was light as a leaf.
I danced like a flower in the wind. I was flower —
plum blossom, honeysuckle, prairie lily,
red and gold. I was the breeze that turned
the windmill, started meadowlarks to caroling,
set the grapes to burgeon on the vine.

I ached to merge with the music,
but after Charlie fastened the bow in its case,
he looked like an ordinary man
and Jorg Jorgensen asked me.

Dancing, 1952-2010

Poem, you can tap, or pirouette,
but come out and dance — jitterbug, or slow tunes
from the Big bands: "Slow Boat to China,"
"Begin the Beguine," "September Song,"
"Kiss Me Once and Kiss Me Twice," "Blue Moon,"
Oh poem, let me put my head on your shoulder
and we'll dance
Remember the little place on Connecticut Avenue,
lights low, dance floor no bigger
than a table top. The gypsy combo played only for
us
when we were the only dancers left,
and you were just home from the war.

Dancing in Des Moines

Celebration of the First Showing
of Native American Parfleshes

for Jay Johnson

Edward Buffalo Horns, national treasure
in his wheel chair, tells old jokes
sings, Mesquakie love songs.
Then four drummers
drum and chant over the platform built
over the reflecting pool
at the Des Moines Art Museum
next to the statue of Pegasus and
Bellerophon, its pediment
a horse's hoof.
First dancer
trips across the bridge,
a little girl
in a jingle dress, three rows
of shiny metal cones
clink, click, on her red skirt.
Five kindergartners dance —
become birds,
their beaded moccasins
scarcely touch the floor.
They waft their arms through fringed shawls,
glide with the music.

Edna Caribou in yellow dress and scarf,
eagle feather in her braids,
dances the drum dance,
twirls, leaps, stamps.
Her thin body becomes drumstick,
thumps the dance floor,
the drumhead for her feet

Fancy dancer Henry Old Moon
circles of eagle feathers
bound to his shoulders,
bound to his waist
jumps, crouches, kicks.
Drummers beat
the rhythm of heart beats
of heart breaks,
lightning and thunder
tumbling across the hills
from Buffalo Center
down the North Skunk River
toward Des Moines.
Pegasus almost flew
from his bronze perch;
Bellerophon almost becomes a god,.
Drums belligerent, bellicose,
bawling, banging
in purple, red, blue;
then baby crying, bluebells blooming,
waves on Okoboji lapping
the marshy shore.

I see that dancers get the closest
to whatever the almost is,
that ineffable,
compelling Something.

Dancing with the Football Coach
Sioux City, Iowa, 1950

Co-eds call him Gorgeous Georgie:
George Allen, single, new football coach
at my small Methodist college.
I'm introduced to him at dinner
for students and faculty at the old minister's home.
George can talk only about football,
keeps asking my date, "Do you like body contact?
Body contact?" Around the table
other students try to keep their faces straight;
old minister's wife chokes; Latin scholar grins;
English Chair titters; his wife says, tsk, tsk,
behind her napkin, but George is innocent.
I want to crawl under the table; my date blushes,
keeps dropping his fork through salad,
roast beef and angel food cake. Never takes me
out again.
Later when George joins the square dance class,
he picks me for a partner. I should never have
danced
with George. He was so old, almost 27.

Dark Coming on at Spirit Lake

A blue-gray scrim descends
Across the far shore.
Small boats rock in the foreground,
Dark coming on and a car's lights
Slice through the trees down the lane.
Here nothing is happening,
Which is just right
Because I'm not doing anything,
Trying not to think or remember.
I am an old chair, a porch railing,
A stretch of lawn to the shore,
Supine, gathering darkness,
Only breathing.

Day after My Brother's Funeral

And how is it with you today, old Mole,
where solitary wasps drill nursery holes
in loosened soil, then drag the newly stunned
cicadas in, lay eggs and tuck their young
into the carcass so when hatched they feed
on living tissue? There the polished seed
bursts its case, puts down white, groping fingers
penetrating dark, long searching tendrils
to try the grave. Their blind eyes can't observe
the underworld. With grief I don't deserve
I wait above. Sorrow fits heart's socket
like arm to shoulder, picture to locket.

I tell myself, resign his life, forget
what's gone —o h Yorick fool, oh Prince Hamlet.

The Dead Seldom Speak

Not all the dead lie still,
Some wander for a while.
Vivian keeps returning
To the laundry room — I don't know why —
Samuel Cyrus is fading faintly into the fog
Moving away from our tears.
His eyes seem to say, there are other worlds.
Uncle Ray stands guard,
Keeping the viper and two crocodiles
Safely away from the young mother's two small
sons.
Tom King watches over
A little red-headed girl.

The dead do what they can
From the shadows until we join them,
And perhaps they are comforted, knowing
We are coming.

Defending Her Reputation

Daylight, sun lifting out of its other-world sleep,
melts the dome of the sky to the color of steam,
western horizon writes river blue, running deep
behind the nursing home above the tended green
self-satisfied lawns. I watch the precious
fragments
of moon, shards broken by the linden's shifting
leaves,
reassemble themselves, seem to pause mid-
descent,
her face pearlescent nacre. But the rigid sleeves
of morning force the old and iron-clad cycle.
Moon drops behind the roof, a slight, silver sliver.
Her moon-mouth wants to speak, to deny the
fickle
sobriquet from men who burn to be her lover.

The Des Moines Art Center
Richard Meier Building

A great art
silo with square
silo windows; double
white metal railings curl
around the inner shell of the building
glass stairs, set in oak frames,
with oak risers, each block etched
with twelve small opaque blocks,
delicate enough for Cinder-
ella's slippers, strong
enough for the entire
ninth grade class
from Winterset
High School.

"Life ain't no
crystal stair," but
this is art, the mother
of life. Imagination insists
on spiraling toward Miro's Woman,
Bird and Stars floating in the
clouds on the landing at the
top, an apotheosis of art;
ascend above the flat
fields of Iowa,
above Grant
Wood 's
globular trees,
above the gold-leaf
Capitol dome, toward the
eternal west, the frontier
dreams, the uncharted continents of creation.

Dirty Comets

The star folk don't like imposters.
They know a comet is merely a dirty snowball
flying through space the way an airplane flies
over a football stadium trailing an advertising
banner.
Comets are no account, yet earthlings
carry on about them.
In 1456 Halley's comet frightened
Europeans so that they fell
on their knees in churches
and prayed to be delivered
from the Devil, the Turk, and the Comet.
The star folk played soccer
with Donati's comet with two curved tails;
they laughed when Biela's broke
in two in 1846 and disappeared.
They glance slyly at each other
as if they know why it has never
come round again. They snicker
that Halley's last round was only a minor flicker.
Hale-Bopp, they say, is a vagrant.
They have been watching the sluice
of the Milky Way for a long time.
They know the bodies of substance.

Dirty Words

The new news
Cleopatra reads it today
she understands

baby cried Chinese tears
Rohinga tears are forbidden
the sacred privileges forbid it
forbid vegetable love,
especially cabbage and carrots
must not mingle — no stew good enough

the sacred cows of Cal Cut
feed them bananas,
feed them rupees and riyals
feed them beggars and street children

feed my people
poison gas and impersonal
bombs dropped by drones
from the secret station in Antarctica

the Preacher says vanity
the darkness says forget it
it's a Putin sunrise
a yacht in the harbor at Larnaka

answers bereft
of decent questions
Decent is a dirty word.

Doing

Doer does. Second
doer doest. Third doer
doeth till do's done.

3/18/2010

Dog Star

Sirius will not fetch,
sit up and beg, or roll over.
The star folk laugh at his companion,
the White Dwarf. These two circle
each other perpetually in lurching orbits.
Every year at the summer solstice
he rises from the Eastern Mediterranean
to look down on the harvest in Egypt.
The brightest star
in earth's heaven, he never barks, so old
he has no teeth. Still, he's a good watch dog;
he has watched for millenniums, faithful
to Orion, the hunter, faithful
as all the stars are faithful.

Donnelly's Bar in Iowa City

Most of the stories about Donnelly's
aren't true. H.L. Menken never took a swing
at a local redneck there; Robert Frost's groupies
were never asked to leave; T. S. Eliot did not
order a cup of tea. Anne Sexton did not stretch out
full length on the bar and begin reciting "String Bean;
Grant Wood never offered to trade "American Gothic"
for a case of beer.

But the Workshop crowd still sits in the back booth,
reading their stories to each other; and Torchy
sits with them, some poet's hand on her knee.

Door

The flowers of winter
Bloom on my door glass,
Their spangled jungles lit
By the cool moon. The frost
Flowers unfurl their wild petals
As the wind wails
A cold tune.

Come to me, lover, lover.
The sun is inside.

Note

Poetry Bag 1:5 Fall 1967

Doppelgangers

I saw Alice Thornton at the Bakershaus Cafe in Amsterdam,
laughing with friends. I recognized her wispy blond hair,
David Rossie with an Indian woman in the train station at Frankfort
only he was smaller and thinner,
Harlo Hanson, whom I know is in Costa Rica
studying birds, at the Deak Ferenc Subway Station,
carrying a small dog in a large bag,
Barbara Donaldson in Keleti Station in Budapest, but alas,
the expression was not Barbara's benevolent smile,
the Orthodox nun, whose stiff black wimple
held her head back so her nose was up in the air —
she was no one I knew, but maybe she was confused
or frightened and trying not to show it,
the desperate saleswoman who emptied her handbag
of little packages, combs, notebooks, key chains onto my table
before the McDonald's people chased her away,
two tall bleached blondes at the next table,
smoking and talking, their cigarettes dangling
from their red mouths,
strange young man with a small bag
over his shoulder, pacing up and down,
watching every direction, is he on the run?
the family come to meet the old grandmother
just arrived from Turkey. All over Europe, I saw my friends
in other guises, and now, here, I think
this is not the train station in Bucharest,
but heaven, and all my dear ones
come to meet me.

Dream

The morning we awoke with tide lapping
at the lip of Main Street here in Iowa,
inland paradise bereft of palms.
The salt sea was coming in; New York, Chicago,
gone.
We could not imagine buoys, lighthouses, ships
that we must build, nor what had erupted
on the other side: the enormous towers of Atlantis,
coral-crusted, exposed after eons under water,
nor that any of them was worth
one house in Illinois, one child struggling
against the current pouring down the canyons
of Manhattan.

Dream Poem I

**If the Earth Is No Longer Solid,
in What Can We Believe?**

Where we stand, on the south lip of the Grand
Canyon
near the jaw, not close enough
to see into the throat, we're safe.
Indian ochre cliffs on the other side,
crevassed, crack along the layers.
There are several of us, you
and two or three others, some whose faces
I cannot see now. What we have been expecting
happens. Earth rolls beneath our feet,
brown dust clouds, double, redouble
their fists, wind licks gray skeins from them,
rise with freight train roars.
Scrub pine, toes dug in for centuries
on the embouchure, shudders; its needles shake
in this great embrace, this bear hug
from the ultimate lover.

"Don't be afraid." I tell you,
"It's crumbling from the other side."

Dream Poem II

Blade

I have come a long way, been with them
a long time. I think they are Lewis and Clark,
only perhaps they are Custer, his lieutenant.
Soldiers all over a shiny yellow map,
rivers squiggled in with blue ink
blue uniformed bodies, sprawled, scattered
across the field.
Someone shows me a circle the size
of Grandma's big round ginger cookies
covered on both sides with tiny white flowers,
real ones, like Queen Anne's Lace, only denser.
Between the two layers, like an Oreo cookie,
the blade for a circular saw. I see the hands
which hold it, the hands only.

Dream Poem IV

I am walking on a country road, steeply uphill,
but it's really a stage set. It's brightly colored
like a cartoon. Maybe I am in a cartoon.
I pass a church yard
where people outside are holding a social a raffle.
Someone gives me a ride. It is in Maine, only the
colors
are cartoon colors. I am working for the Rawson's,
walking back to their house. There is another
woman
with me, perhaps the driver of the car. We stop
at a home where the woman has antiques. I look
at a pile of fabrics and find a quilt which I can
afford
to buy. One block is torn, but it's a good quilt.
But the woman who is the driver gets to buy it. It's
as if I didn't exist. I look through the other piles
of linens and fabrics, but there is nothing else
of any value.

I am a student, standing in line to register to vote.
A rather good looking, tall thin boy is behind me.
The woman who is taking the registrations makes
me
write down my new address and it takes me a long
time.
It seems to be a bar code. The young man can't
register
until I'm finished. I finally do. There is someone
with me, maybe Fee. He doesn't seem to mind.

Drinking Stars

The water bucket's black mirror
catches stars. I scoop them up
in the gourd dipper, swallow. They slide down
quick — cold from their long journey.

I slip into our bed,
next to your long body,
brush my hands across
your shoulders, arms,
thighs.

Look, I have stolen Orion's belt;
three stars shine through the fret
of my skin. Touch me
and comets explode
loosing gold petals
that fall like snow
or fire, swarm into white drifts
of desire.

Drinking Stars

At midnight (your sleep is sound)
I slip outside for a drink of water
from the bucket, its mouth
black and deep.
Stars float on its satin surface.
I catch two in the gourd dipper
and swallow them; they slide down my throat,
smooth and shining. I step soft
on the creaking floor
back to our bed, back between
the white sheets,
open my mouth to taste your shoulder,
the bite of their orbits on my lip.

Driving to La Crosse, Wisconsin,

The highway passes black and white cows
grazing on Intense kelly green pastures,
cuts through hills' bones,
wanders under oaks' cumulous brows
hanging above the road like guilt,
past signs urging Mary Lou Burkster for Auditor.
Mary Lou, I will take up residence, register, vote
for you,
build my cabin on layers of coral skeletons,
small shells, put down one by one a million years
ago.
I will live like cliff swallows, swim the air
past these solidified reminders of another life,
look down on fields of white alfalfa and Queen
Anne's lace
beside the Father of Waters.

My Buick purrs past the Shellhorn Tavern
offering Music, Liquor, Dancing.
Radio hums with more news than I want to know:
A man to emergency at St. Francis —
cut by his girl at Panther's Landing.
Maybe when she got drunk, she got mean
and he got weak, a Wisconsin Sampson.
Or maybe drunk, he was mean; she desperate.
The surgeon sewed up his perforated gut.
He wouldn't press charges. But whether they
reconcile
and throw away their knives, cling together,
not a razor's width between them, or whether this
rips them apart and she drifts downstream, he
pushes
against the current, knocks on the lock
at Number Nine and Ten and all the others until he
reaches St. Paul, I will put down my foundation,
dress the stone for my house,
live here, listen to winds sough,
barge horns bellow, water speak sibilant
nonsense.
I will be Mary Lou's voter, bear and wildcat's wary
sister.

Drought

Calvin looks at the sky,
He wipes his hands on his overalls
And mutters.
I tell the children, Bend
Your reluctant knees and pray.

All July, all through August this hot
Wind whistled up clouds.
They passed over, their bellies swollen
With moisture. They rained
On Illinois, but not here.

Here in Cottonwood, South Dakota,
The brown grass blows
Against the ground, the ground
That still smells of buffalo.
Put your ear to the earth
And you can hear thunder
Reverberating from a million hooves.
And that's the only crop we'll get
This year.

At night there is heat-lightening
In the south, but there's no rain in it.

A coyote bays the dry moon
With the blasphemy we don't dare.
The pink neons signaled
Dot, dash, dot.
Her heels clicked on the concrete
And she remembered:

Disembodied
Lights streaking down the straight
Road far away in the darkness.
Somewhere a dog barking.
And then only the night breeze.
Creaking the windmill.

Dry Bones

Now that stones have crushed me,
the slick creature squeezed out
and I am left here like a split snakeskin
like an old kid glove,
desiccated in the merciless sun,
fingers curling
into an obscene gesture,

I perish of drought,
dryness splitting my edges,
Old One, I have called your name,
and you have not heard.
I hear distant howls of the predators,
feel the antenna of ants,
the minute inspection of maggots,
watch the shadow of the vulture
above me. Remember your promise,
deaf one. Remember me now,
one of the inheritors.

Early in March, 2011

At Christmas Time*
Georgia in New York bragged about her amaryllis
spike
3 feet, 5 inches tall already and not yet open.
(I don't think it's a true amaryllis — must be some
African
gone mad.)
Alyse in California about her poinsettias that grow
like weeds,
tall as her house.
Frannie in Florida dead-heads the hibiscus.
(Grandma calls them biscuits.)
Mary is studying seed catalogues at night in
Maine
where once a moose looked in her window.
Carol at Spirit Lake says her philodendron died
today
and that the snow collapsed the neighbor's porch,
kindling now, and the boxwood shrubs around it
crushed.
I am encouraging my Christmas cactus that
bloomed in December,
and is blooming again, to keep it up — it can be an
Easter cactus, too.

I don't know whether it is enough
to grow flowers in this world, beauty so ephemeral
and unutilitarian, when the race is rocked
by screams and blood,
the long lines of refugees,
Darfur, Iraq, Haiti, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan,
wilting and falling
like petals.

Note

Struthers penned in several changes. This opening line is one of them; the rest were word changes and additions.

Early Morning on the Lake

One mirror lake; one
red fishing boat; one white gull,
and I, the watcher.

Effigy Mounds National Monument
Sunday, October 18, 1992

Bass leaves spin down, pulled loose
by the wind's hook. Their heart shapes
paper the path. Ahead on the cliffs,
vermillion, maroon, frosted burgundy.
Some brown. We stop by the stone foundation
of Mattie Johnson's' cabin,
a few tattered lilacs beside what used to be
her front door, behind the house
her apple trees still bearing:
Mel jumps, pulls down a branch
and we pick one for each of us,
rub them clean on our jeans.
Hard and cold, they challenge our mouths.
We laugh and lick the juice
from our fingers before we pull on
our gloves again.

Someone has stuck contour feathers
from the red-tailed hawk here and there
in little galls on the trees,
the rusty-red band at the top,
smoky grey down at the bottom
of the quill. Did they do it,
we wonder, to praise the hawk?
or to redefine Columbus, the predator?

The burial mounds are snakes, a few eagles
large as God, and seven marching bears
big as houses, who climb this hill
away from the Mississippi
until a fence and wooden gate stop* them.
From the cornfield beyond, coyote
emerges, fat with fall field mice,
sees John Peterson, Nancy Jo, and me,
flattens out for a grey dash
across the alfalfa. Disappears
behind a hill that leads to a draw
Sun warm on our backs, but we finally turn,
reluctant, head back again to the old blue Datsun
in the Yellow River Forest parking lot,
walking on the side of the bear.

Note

The typescript has "stops".

The Elusive "Beautiful and True Poem"

It comes in with the lake's waves,
Translucent just below the curl, collaged
With weeds, sticks from the far shore, fish bones,
Pebbles plucked from old glacial pockets,
Or it floats on milkweed silk.
It changes as the cumulous clouds change;
It hides in pomegranate seed,
Persephone in the cold, cold ground.
Oh, love, in winter the docks are matchsticks
Against the ice's weight, the tons of their thighs.

Seven pelicans coast close to the surface.
Old farm houses watch, their vacant eyes
Staring straight ahead. Sometimes
The angle of the setting sun catches them
Bursting with flames.

Night comes mysteriously and unknown lights
Follow the road, some couple going to a dance
(I always imagine dancers). It's really a farmer
going home to milk his cows, a factory worker
who assembled motorcycles all day long at the plant,
a high school kid just cruising around.

Sand waits, patiently for the lake's cool lip.
Porch swing sways gently, ghosts pushing it,
Young lovers gone years ago.

I never knew I'd embrace without passion,
that passion could flee, migrating with the wild geese.
Lights twinkle on the far shore. They don't really twinkle —
Something invisible in between
Makes them appear to vacillate, hesitate.
It's always the in between that disrupts,
Erupts, corrupts (oh, beautiful corruption),
No scientific explanation can embroider
The cosmic winks of terrestrial lights
And stars. The true poem is not
what it seems — and more.

Everyday Happenings

I unfold Mother's old letters,
caress the linen paper of her writing table.
She never told me who was sick, who died.
She didn't want me to weep, so I never got the news
from that white paper. Only the weather, her roses;
the mail man was late; she picked the first green beans.
Meanwhile people had car wrecks, died of cancer.
She went to the funerals, but I, in my imagination,
still saw the little town peopled with all of them.
Mrs. Pete Hanson, her best friend, still driving her model T;
Angus Thorsen before the bullies from Lake Park beat him up,
bludgeoned his bald head; Angie Anderson's curly haired baby
toddling before the mad dog. She could not bear any of them dead,
nor could I imagine her inevitable and desperate losses.

Eve's Children

She never could have guessed that two of you
would play the harp, could pluck the strings that speak
to spirit's inner turmoil, to renew
the old heart, which like Saul's, or like hers, breaks
among the broken, sings among pieces.
She never could have guessed that one of you
would ride the hunter, take the jumps, fences,
as if you and the horse were one sinew.

And one of you took drugs, copped out, rebelled,
refused the world of thought, of work, of art
and huddled with false snow for wife, compelled
to staring at the wall, to dreaming, part
of another state of pleasure and pain
where you spent everything for sweet cocaine

The Face and the Womb

Innocent in the sun,
The quiet fields,
Vacant as the face
Of a Madonna, are working,
Moving beneath the grass;
In the dark, casting
Up stones to nick
The plow next spring. Walk
The fields, pick up the rocks, thrown
Them on the wagon, but the earth gnashes
Its teeth, and in the dark
Of the moon, spits out granite.
Deep down in its craw the rocks rumble,
And the dinosaur bones rub
Together, and in slick pools, the melted
Tyrannosaurus and the giant ferns roil,
But so far,
They have not emerged.

Facing West from California's Shores

The Pacific is not pacific,
great whales plow its lanes,
submerge, emerge, spout,
frolic, but my dolor is not assuaged,
I do not see the sun shine through
the curve of the wave, just below the froth,
I do not see endless possibilities,
I do not see the lacquer boxes of China,
the parasols of Japan.

Looking East from California's Shores
I see the greed of great companies,
power wielded by little minds
and narrow hearts.
Oh great heart of Whitman,
who saw all the goodness of America
we need you now,
need a stentorian voice to shout
from Brooklyn Bridge, from the Empire State Building,
from the Sears Tower and the John Hancock,
from the Grand Canyon, from Mt. Etna and the Space Needle.
Come back, America, to the dreams
of Tom Paine and Sam Adams
the stoic righteousness of Washington
the fidelity of Lincoln. We have become a nation
of wizened ideas, of wizened people
where the young sell their souls for the white escape of drugs
and the old steal riches with the blood of patriots
in the sands of Iraq. Oh, Whitman, how have we come here?
how have we become the antithesis of your dream?
The ghosts of the great founders are weeping now,
and on this Fourth of July, I am weeping
in the rocket's red glare. Stars from the flag
are falling.

The Fall

Stars were tossed by a giant hand,
into their lunatic patterns — where they sleep,
not troubled by dreams of glory
or rumors of war, not touched by the music,
but star dust drifts down
every day, tons every year.

In the night, the constellations wheel around
their separate tracks, above the bones
of Amelia Earhart's plane, above the rusting Arizona
in Pearl Harbor, above lovers on Lilac Hill,
oh, youth is a permeable membrane,

and life is short for love and the touch
of the beloved hand.
The Pawnee's bison constellation
flares with a collar of flame and crackling hoofs.

Lightning in the photo you sent me,
writes your initial on the anvil hoods
of roiling cumulous, and its great voice
blares out of the dark, hurling prophecies,
rain carrying cargoes of Stardust.

The Via Doloroso where Jesus walked
is seven feet down under dust,
and Jerusalem is weeping now; oh, suffering stars,
shed light!

Family Pictures

Linda and I flip through photograph albums,
into the dark cave of the pictures.
We find ourselves, the old house,
Mother pushing Lou in his stroller,
Carl and Martha hanging onto her skirt
as if they might lose her. All of us
lost her long before the funeral.
"Why didn't she ever hug us?"
Linda asks.

Here Mother holds Martin's birthday cake,
her perpetual frown, two deep grooves
between her eyes, accented by candlelight.
She was like a clock;
always working, exact, undemonstrative.
"It doesn't take any time to give a kid a hug,"
Linda insisted. "She took time
to give us a spank, though. A spank or two."

Here's mother sitting on the step
with the twins — "She had too many kids,"
I say remembering
that I would have gone crazy
without the babies' hugs and kisses.

I see her out there somewhere
in the black galaxy, a tiny pinpoint star,
who understands everything now,
beating her angel wings toward us,
but light years and light years away.

Farm Wives and Their Husbands

Husbands spend their lives in fields,
barns, granaries, talk little,
interpret wind's moods, weather's frown,
understand cattle bawls, hog squeals,
sheep bleats, know owl and hawk's scream,
tractor's roar, harvester's racket.
Words feel alien, twist awkward on their tongues.

The wives' spend their lives with children,
seeds, weeds. They pick, can, cook,
wash the dirty, iron the clean,
comfort babies, cosset grannies,
brew herb tea for female troubles,
sew, mend, bake, keep working hard
to stave off introspection
for their own heart breaks.

Sometimes the husbands' lives
and the wives' lives cross,
but only in bed, or at Christmas,
or when someone dies. Some wives
cry secretly, but the men never cry.

Farming in Latin

I like to think of words
from their ancient action and old implements:

Versus — the plowman carves
a furrow across the field, turns up
soil so black it shines blue
in the sunlight. White gulls
follow him and his patient horse.
He turns at the end of the row and reverses,
just as the poem comes back with another
meaning
opened up and curling over itself,
verse and verse, even *verso.*

Virgil returns to his farm;
brings the Muse to his own country
north of Rome, writes the *Georgics.*
Centuries later Willa Cather watches the plow
silhouetted against the Nebraska prairie sunset.
Optima dies...prima fugit,
I remember, now, sounds
which I cherish: my father, ignorant of Latin,
calling the milk cows into the dusky barn,
"So boss, boss, bossy."

Fear

You have never favored me, wicked sprite.
You might have been helpful with oversight,
with dire warnings drummed inside my chest.

Alone, I trudged where angels fear to hike
and been the worse for it. You grin delight.
(Just once I heard you whistle in the night.)

You know the weak will fall into distress;
the strong think that they make their own success
but they fall from their own conceitedness.

Fear in the Middle

I have watched sunset in Beirut while strolling the Cornish;
sunset from the escarpment at Wadi Rum where Lawrence camped;
watched the sun sink in Colombo, Sri Lanka, when dusk
beckons forth thousands of giant bats, silent and ominous.

On the dock tonight at Iowa's Methodist Camp
on Lake Okoboji, same falling sun, same neutral sky. Here in peace
I think of Beirut where ragged eyes from mortar shells
still look down from their vacant sockets,
and Aqaba, where the Palestinian refugees
stare across the straits at Eliat,
and long for their homes in Israel,
and Colombo where my old friend still finds slivers of glass
working out from his face when he shaves every morning —
suicide bomber and he was too close to the window.

Insulation, isolation, safety in the middle
of the middle but I hear the drums of aggression
and arrogance from Washington, D. C.,
and I fear, oh, I fear for my country.

Field Trip

Alice said, "We've got to get the hell out of here,"
high school seniors on the bus, dying
to leave Persia, Iowa, it's small library

it's musty movie house, its ordinary thinking.
(We were so much more sophisticated
than our parents: her mother a housewife;

her father drove the diesel truck that delivered
fuel to the farms for their ordinary tractors
to their ordinary fields; what did they know?

my father farmed those ordinary fields;
mother tended the babies that came regularly,
ordinary blond, blue-eyed, smiling, and gurgling.)

We could do better than they did.
The school trip was to see the horse slaughter house
in Estherville where the horses, cheap from the sales barns,

were fed into the chute, trying to kick
in the narrow channel making a tinny din —
pandemonium as the workers beat them

into position — one or two barred their teeth, screamed,
they should have been eating hay in the red barns
browsing in the sweet green pastures.

I wanted to scream too, as the animals were tipped
upside down, suspended by their hind legs —
mesmerized, we watched the leather aproned one whose knife

slit their noble throats as they passed him by — rip, spurt,
jump back, rip, spurt, jump back, the great horses
becoming blood, becoming cuts of meat for Frenchmen

and dogs. Those girls got sick and vomited
the boys, trying to be brave made ghostlike jokes
Alice and I, sophisticated, vomited

Our teacher said it was an educational trip
And we wondered what we had learned
that we didn't know already

Finding Stars and Planets

Mathematicians are sorting out chaos,
intent on order, establishing patterns,
corralling the disheveled stars.
Tiny white petals of wild plum bushes,
scattered by random winds, are stars, also,
and white starflowers of spring
validate grass.
Yellow puffball goslings
like planets orbit the pond,
following their mother's dark sun.

Fireflies

Night travelers through Mayan forests
string their bootlaces with fireflies
to illuminate paths.
Some species' eggs glow in the dark,
the larva switching off and on,
even the pupa phosphorescent.
Cuban girls wear living click beetles
impaled on gold chains,
their emerald glow intermittent
in the valley between their breasts.

We sit on our summer porch,
watch Iowa fireflies, random as thoughts,
baste gold stitches across grass,
through grapevine's trellis,
between lilies' nodding stalks,
into dark webs of oak —
male fireflies following
females' flashing signals.

We have been together a long time,
comfortable with desire,
and still — flashes of intensity
like this cool green luminescence.

Fireworks

Spangled chrysanthemums explode
above the river,
dust of gilt, dust of blue;
muffled echoes ricochet off tall buildings.
Grey smoke ghosts form opaque bodies,
undulate, fade. I have tasted these colors,
felt explosion's mushroom shapes,
traced neon minnows swimming
into the blood's cascade, tingling
finally in my fingertips. Fourth of July,
your patterns are the old patterns
grandmothers traced, never divulged
by their tongues, but known,
understood, smiled on,
sighed for at night.
Snakes! Sparklers!!
Roman Candles!!! Cherry Bombs!!!!

First Strawberries

I wade through snow, slush to buy
spring's first strawberries.
I look them over, think they are not imposters,
They are shaped like strawberries,
wear green, twelve-leafed caps
like strawberry hulls; their complexion
is almost red.

I know they are shipped in from Mexico
where spring has already arrived,
were picked green so they would last
the trip, and although their flesh is hard,
seeds massed on their pale faces,
tough as miniature beards,
they tell me spring lives
mostly in the imagination,
and I slice a bowl of them,
cover them with cream,
ingest metaphor which feeds me
as truly as my June Berries will,
still dormant, but not dead,
under the drifts in my garden.

Fishing from the Bridge in Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Forty pound test line, Berkley reel,
oiled and working well, fat nightcrawlers.
September sun, small waves like fish scales.
Man feels a cautious nibble. Then below
the dark water fish takes the bait. Man sets hook;
fish runs line out as far as it can go —
the cord between them as tenuous as love
and as invisible. Man begins reeling carp in;
fish lets him have the slack before he dives.
If the Red Cedar River had been the South Atlantic,
he would have sounded like Moby Dick. Carp lunges,
twists; man resists all its river strength;
line holds; rod arches; carp's ugly jaw breaks water.
Man pulls him in to flop on the deck, gills
pulsing like an accordion, eyes huge as brass cymbals.

Then man sees that fish had been headed for the falls
to leap the cataract like salmon, lie on the spray-
wet rock to rest before the last steep assault,
knowing the Chinese legend that says carp who climb
waterfalls, at the top become dragons,
demanding, but beneficent, their fiery breath
protecting their people.

But it is too late now. Man takes fish home;
carves it into steaks; hangs it in the smoke house.
Later he will cook it for his children
who will dream of dragons.

Fools

"There's no fool like an old fool," Father said
of old man Exter when he married his hired girl,
she thirty, he sixty. Her only dowry, her work-chapped hands;
he owned one hundred-eighty acres, had saved enough cash
to build a new barn.

Mother nodded agreement, adjusted her tight-lipped smile.
They had long since abandoned foolish love.
Now they have abandoned this foolish world.
I, who believed in love,
have come finally to the granite fence,
have watched love limp off in another direction,
know there are several ages for fools.

Still, I remember Hannah Exter
coming in from her garden, her apron gathered
into a basket to carry Ruby Queen beets,
Beefmaster tomatoes, Kentucky Wonder string beans,
a beatific smile on her plain face, asking us
to come in, have a cup of coffee at her kitchen table,
pouring the rich cream with extravagance,
giving her neighbors a little of her foolish happiness.

For the Fancy Poets
(they know who they are)

I have never seen
the pure landscapes of time.
Out here on the plains
it's hard to find a hill
high enough.
I used to climb the windmill
once in a while, but all
I ever noticed was Hilmer's Brown Swiss
in the cow yard by the creek
and Sylvester Hanson's pick-up racing
a funnel of dust into town.

For One Who Jumped the Line

The words came over wires and the black telephone
turned to ice, turned to a heavy stone in my hand, and my daughter
had to take it from me and talk in a calm voice. I had no voice.
It had called silently after you, but you were beyond hearing
and I sat there like stone, not comprehending, stupid as stone.

After a while I could walk around,
but I was in an invisible box,
completely contained — where the real world
didn't touch me — where I saw the world, but didn't comprehend it,
couldn't feel or care, those numb walls between me and everything.

I went with my sisters to buy the flowers, and we bought them,
bought the crystal vase for his widow. I saw his children
through the glass, bewildered as the baby rabbits
in the garden after their mother was shot, hunched down and trembling.
Then the cemetery and the general's hands on my shoulders, holding me up,
he who had seen so many die in Vietnam.

Later I was angry. I was the oldest, had done everything first,
now you had usurped my place. I had planned to die first,
knew I would be the first, but you broke the line.
You were unfair. I hadn't meant to ever mourn a brother or sister.

Driving home, the clouds in the sky, one like an enormous angel,
I swear it, an angel as big as the Western sky, grey and moving slowly.
I said to myself, if this is comfort, it's very far away,
cold and grey, and it was months before I could say your name
without crying.

Four Haiku from Spirit Lake

The aluminum
boat catches setting suns' rays
and winks him good night.

Yellow fishing boat
tossed by storm's waves dips, wallows.
True sportsmen don't quit.

Cottonwood tree tops
sway with winds' rhythm, whisper
love to morning clouds.

Through the blind's slim slits
I watch swallows ornament
the wires where they perch.

Fraternity Party

Ah, Circe, fermented corn
for your lovers, outworn;
whenever one became
nothing but a lump in bed,
his ardor lame,
and his snore
intolerable, you changed
him into swine.
He gobbled swill
on your range;
the Aegean wine
was spilled
for other lovers.

I, having fed
Iowa pigs
on days when the sun covers
the prairies, hot and big,
leaving the hog house cool,
there the buzz of flies,
the dull
grunt of porkish lies,
I know why you chose this animal,
neither maximum
nor minimal,
but accurate,
instincts intact,
little eyes like dirty plums —

I have seen
Circe's Hellenes'
descendants snuffle
girls and booze and dine as
party subtle
as Belted Hampshires, Poland Chinas.

Note

A different version appears in *Stoneboat*.

From My Cold Office

Sitting in my cold office
before the streets of Paris,
staring at Utrillo's blue figures
with the gate to the courtyard open a little,
there should be two workmen in blue smocks
sitting on the cobbles, leaning
against the tool shed, swigging from a bottle
of wine, their bread and sausage
laid out on a napkin before them.
It's lunch in Paris, and I am hurrying
toward Café Procope where Franklin met Voltaire.
The place is different now, refurbished
in faded Victorian brocade, but the wide floor-
boards
are the same — I hope they are the same ones
that Franklin walked on,
Franklin in his brown Quaker clothes,
not a Quaker, but he never disappointed
his audience. Through the small-paned, high-
browed
windows the February sun shines, pale and brave
and across the way someone set an early pot of
geraniums
on the iron-grilled balcony, red against the faded
white wall. Maybe Franklin saw one like it there;
he was an old man then, or Diderot may have sat
here.

Garage Sale

For 50 cents, a CD
"Living the Perfect Life,"
and I left it there among the green glass vases,
wilted candles, leaking teddy bears.
I was too thrifty, too skeptical,
too self-satisfied with my imperfect life.

Garden of Stone and Light

Crowds of students must separate around
this dream of phallic symbol,
pillar of stone that screams domination,
rocket-shaped in a hall dedicated
to mathematics, where trajectories
are planned, programs written for missile paths
that can blow up villages, hurl children
like rag dolls from exploding houses, where
soldiers come through the smoke to rape mothers.

Here in Durham Computation Center
numbers are not gods, neither archaic
Roman numerals nor subtle Arabic whorls.
Even logic is a dissembler. I am sick
to death of solipsism's of old men,
sick of societies that plot azimuths of murder,
wash the hands of the mathematician,
far removed from the little girl
running down the jungle path
aflame with napalm. Oh science,
how can I believe you when I see
her mouth burned away to a black hole?

Nothing is neutral in use,
even the lotus, floating like Buddha
its umbilical cord adrift
through the muddy pond that is both
and neither time and space. Mathematic
tradition is not rock but sea; deep in
the waters of faith Euclid swims, his arms
metronomes for his backstroke.

Above this massive marble stone
hang two canvases, repeating,
intensifying the sculpture's colors, except each
displays a window of sky, small spaces
brushed with horse tail clouds, cirrus, promising
three days from now rains will fall like blessings.

The Gardener's Coronal: Three Parts

I

The Vegetarian's Garden

The herbs of flavor, anise, six-foot dill,
(a sprig of it will guard against a witch)
stalks of Chinese rhubarb, medicinal —
in equal rows. All order here. Life split
in balanced parts before he came along.
There's Homer's plain parsley, and chard, white-veined,
which Theognis loved — Aristotle fond
of red-leafed. Rabelais brought France romaine.

He brought me love and grief; he brought me seeds.
He left before the slender shoots unfurled.
He didn't stay, sweet thief, to hoe and weed;
he stole away and left me with a world
diminished, dark, bereft of cake and wine.
And now the black snake lives beneath the vine.

II

Blacksnake and Catbird

And now the blacksnake lives beneath the vine,
and forages for chipmunks, mice, for flesh
and bone, for blood; the catbird searches, finds
the meaty cabbage worm for lunch. Balance
of good and evil? Gain and loss? Cool coil
with ganglion for brain, grey feathered head
without a conscience: you go about your toil
assiduously. No old myths, no dread,
just business. Your quick, selfish intrusion
bewilders my sense of rightness. I pluck
this lettuce leaf; it trembles, contusion,
then limpness. It was living, too. Bad luck
when cut worm bites, canker bores.
When he left
the pond went dry; the vine and fig tree wept.

III

Vine and Fig Tree

The pond went dry; the vine and fig tree wept.
Australia's drifting south. This fissured world
was Eden once. Now lily's sail is reft.
Rabbits snip off buds, snack on ferns unfurled.
Impartial sun shines down, oblivious
to change and scorns the words I wish I'd said.
Relentless dandelions bloom and floss;
I watch the robins bathe, plashing their heads;
no comfort in the fountain's plaintive plink,
finches' twitter. I survey my boxwood paths,
try to read my books on ancient Greeks.
"Forget," I say, "he's gone and gone for good."

But everything that's here speaks his name still:
the herbs of flavor, anise, six-foot dill.

Genevieve Loach

Mr. Loach went someplace and never came back.
Mrs. Loach, a tough old bird, —
lived with her scrubby children
at the dump at Persia, Iowa.
They scavenged and every fall
she made molasses from cane, boiling down
the sap for syrup in a big iron caldron
in her wash house. Because of the dump's rats,
at least thirty untamed cats hung out there.
One of them, curious,
leapt up on the cupboards and peered over
the rim of the pot which Mrs. Loach was stirring.
Peered too far and fell in. Mrs. Loach fished it out,
and kept on stirring, at least
that's what Pete Hanlon said, who was there,
buying a couple of old tires from the dump.

So it's no wonder Genevieve wasn't popular,
a small, dark girl whose mouth sagged at one
corner
and who wore wrinkled long brown stockings
when the rest of us wore white anklets.

Nobody would sit by the girl-from-the dump
in the lunch room. She didn't have a lunch pail —
just a plastic bag. Ate molasses sandwiches.
At recess we didn't let her play in our games.
But in the fifth grade I thought anything was
possible,
so I tried to make Genevieve popular. Failed, of
course.
Genevieve was shy, wary of us
with our bright blue and pink dresses
beside her black and brown. We tossed our curls,
laboriously produced by our mothers from Toni
kits.
Her hair was cut straight all around
by her mother and hung like black strings,
falling across her eyes, and Miss Rockwood,
said, "Genevieve, brush back your hair,
so you can see."

Ginkgo Tree, a Fall in Fall

For luck and loveliness in temple yards,
auspicious in Japan, they bless Shinto
temples. But first trees grew in old Cathay
migrated eons past, fan-shaped ginkgo

leaves shaded dinosaurs. Alone, orphan,
in its own genus, the scientists learned
no other relatives although it seems
to favor parts of prehistoric fern.

When all of nature's elements are right,
weather, rain, the season's ending hour,
sometimes in Fall it sheds its golden leaves
all at once and rains a golden shower.

Girl in the Straw Hat

in the photographer's window,
looking back at sixteen, wistful,
the year of the red Corvette
and country music,
loud on the portable radio
at Lake McBride,
flying the hull of the Hobi Cat,
and scuba diving, the tanks
clumsy on your shoulders
like new-grown wings.

God, Ronald Reagan,
and the Cosmic Pinball Machine

I want to spend billions to clean up the petroleum sludge
your millionaires poured in my lake. Clean water
for fish, for children to splash in, for the moon
to wash her face.

Ronald Reagan wants to spend the money on Star Mars,
an invisible, invincible umbrella to protect us
from rockets, so he can say to the Ruskies,
"Okay, make my day!"

I see a gang of boys at Maybel's Cafe surround
the pinball machine, watch one boy play,
intense, as if he believes
in its painted green surface;
he pats its rainbow colored sides,
one of his knees braced against its long, straight leg.
Release the plunger that beats the colored marble,
sends it careening around the knobs and breakers.
He knows how much he can lean on it
before TILT flashes, oh, he and their masculine power
have leaned on me while my lights flashed on
and off, green and amber, ten thousand, twenty, a million,
Win enough points and get a free ticket to heaven
and a personal welcome from God himself
who likes a good game of pinball
when he's bored with killing sparrows.

The girls watch, giggle. They don't waste their money
on pinball. They buy cherry cokes, lipsticks, mascara,
movie magazines bulging with romance.

The generals wear medals on their fat chests
shit in my lake, piss in my river.
Oh generals who dreamed up the invisible umbrella,
cousins of the weavers who wove the emperor
invisible clothes, a penny for the river,
a penny for the lake. Save the moon
from the garbage scow; save the children
a little bit of white beach.

And Ronald Reagan won more free pinball games
than anybody else in Dixon, Illinois.
And God said, "That's power! That's glory!
That's a cosmic pinball champion!
Going Down a Long Way
I went down forever, breathing icicles like knives.
Hours of pain; then the cloudy water
coalesced and I saw a bear. He opened his jaws,
swam after me, trying to kill me.
I dodged and swam; he chased me,
slick, huge, his paws big as scoop shovels,
his claws like daggers. I feinted,
weaved like playing basketball,
tried to dodge, tried to hide.
I was a muskie, a pike, maybe I was a minnow.
I swam under his belly, over his ears.
For three nights and three days, he followed me under water,
ice beginning to form on the surface.
I searched the lake floor for a weapon —
threw old fish hooks, broken poles,
rusty bait buckets, at him, but nothing hurt him.
Afternoon of the third day, swimming near Peck's Point
where we went down, there, gleaning on the bottom
of that glacial trench, a silver hockey stick!
Now I thought, now or nothing, although I knew
I was already a strange sort of nothing. I was afraid,
thinking there might be something more terrible than death.
I picked up the stick; it was like holding courage in my fingers,
it poured strength into my arms,
and shivering through its length, its words

wrote on my hand:
"You are already dead,
so what more can he do?"
The stick used its power, turned me to face him.
He snarled madness and all the evil in the world
His open mouth was red, his awful teeth yellow.
He reared up on his hind legs,
But I was lighter than he was, and my life jacket lifted me,
I swam above him, ramming that hockey stick
down his open maw. Rammed and rammed. He twisted,
turned, flailed his paws randomly, but I twisted and turned
with him and finally he lay still on the bottom.

I cut myself a coat from his fur and sometimes
while darkness pulls itself together, I surface
to watch my old friends at play.
After they've gone home to their warm houses,
I knock the puck around in the moonlight.

Going On

He could not stop the future from happening.
Coe College Student

Moonrise, moonset, sunrise, sunset,
Hale-Bopp in its elliptical orbit,
all orbits, real and those drawn for the geometry books,
going on, despite his tears, his screams, his hand
held up against them.
The imagination does not stop,
but continues to chum even when the dictator
outlaws it. Nor could he stop calamities,
Andrew and Rita; Katrina gobbled up New Orleans,
swallowing whole parishes. Preservation Hall jazz
couldn't stop its gluttony.
Global warming melting the polar bears' lairs,
Kilauea erupting, extruding a red snake
that hissed at the mouth of the sea,
tsunami that swamped Galle, ignoring the sea wall,
sneaking around the peninsula from the rear,
Hikadua washed away. He could not stop it,
did not even try, because the future
runs in winged shoes and always wins the race.
He was engulfed by the rose-red lava,
drowned on the beach at Hambantota
washed away in a bass viol into the delta
eaten by the hungry bears, bewildered
by the geometry books, hitched a ride
on Hale-Bopp; he'll come round
in another 243 years, his imagination
leaving a veil of sparks that spell
"He could not stop the future."

Golden

California forest fungi grow golden
on the fallen leaves, shading at the center
into orange. Wood fungi, like rows of shells
tossed up by measured waves of the sea, cling
to dead log's flesh, have brown button centers,
shading beige and yellow at their ruffled petticoat
edges.
Golden slug creeps, like a dead magnolia leaf.
His dorsal ridge like the leaf's vein.
Only his pale grey horns, flexing, betray him.

Across the valley, golden hills where
the 49ers found a kind of gold they understood,
twinkling like the gates of heaven,
heavy in the hand and tender for everything
they wanted — gold whiskey in the glass,
golden girls, the whisper of a golden future.
They forced the mountains to bow down,
sluicing away the earth's ancient knees.

At Father Serra's home mission at Carmel—
clay bricks troweled with golden adobe.
Men dressed in black like crows had taught him
the only true gold was the saved soul.
I think of the golden feathers
of the eagle the natives wore,
how they were forced to bow down,
to become slaves.

Loggers force the redwoods to bow down,
suburban sprawl forced the California condor
to bow down — no longer are his wide spirals
written on the golden air.

Today the dark green gardens
around the Carmel Mission are lit
with California's golden poppies.
They toss their small silk flags,
asking how long? They bend in the wind,
and they have not yet bowed
their brave colors.

Good Day/Bad Day

I can't help myself
Repeat, repeat it.

Today I am the sun and all the planets,
even the planets of all the planets.

I snap my fingers and the world opens its blinds.
I step on my magic carpet
and fly to my office.

My keyboard is a player piano.
I twirl in my office chair
like all the world's merry-go-rounds.

I eat Hersey bars and Butterfingers for lunch,
 buy my dessert at Dairy Queen, a Heath Bar
Blizzard on max.
I will never grow fat.

After work the wind sings for me,
somewhere the campfire is cooking my hamburger
and the poison ivy has turned into roses.

I drink my decaf straight,
and go to sleep in my best dreams.

My Bad Day.

It rained all the waterfalls in Africa
including Victoria Falls
dropping in thunder and foam

All the vines in the Amazon
caught me, held me prisoner
began to eat my flesh

I screamed, but in the jungle
where no one heard that single tree fall
my screams grew anthurium,

I kicked against the traces
not hooked onto the doubletree,
so the horses of fate ran away with my wagon.

A wreck, a wreck, a disaster
a siren, a flashing light, an ambulance
a ticket, a fine, two fines, a lot of money

a broken everything
clavicle, femur, arms, little fingers,
the spirit, the budget, the whole day wasted
and it kept on raining.

Grandfather's Tongue

Why didn't my grandfather settle
in California? Homestead where Hollywood
now stands — rather than on the wind-swept
prairies
of Iowa? Was it the language? the dialect
of Danish Schleswig, no longer spoken
mostly lost, a language of puns,
word play, humor. Was he caught
in a trap of the old words that allowed
him to migrate only to a country
where he could hear and practice
that slippery tongue? — he who loved
the English words, too, called
his six strapping sons, who worked the farm
for him all day, danced and drank all night —
my buckoos, my sweet buckoos!

Grandmother Smith

Grandmother treated me like all the other 12 or 15 cousins who gathered on Sunday afternoons. I was no better, no worse. She was indifferent, telling me, "Look after the little kids," shooing all of us out into the muddy yard. Inside she'd pour more coffee for the aunts and uncles. Grandfather said nothing, packed his pipe. Struck match after wooden match, and finally lit it. I didn't want to make up games for those snot-nosed, whining brats. I wanted to hear about Uncle Danny's divorce, and what Snicker's girl was up to now, and Cousin Marcella's suicide. She put on her new pink lace slip before she took poison and lay down in her bed. But I was out in the yard with those quarrelsome, tattle-tales, playing Pum-Pum Pull Away, Dodge Ball, and Annie-I-Over.

Mother told me that Grandma loved us all equally, but I wasn't satisfied with love that did not recognize merit, rank, station, my special superiority. Hers was portioned out to the gram in exact shares, no more, no less, like the love of God, and I see now what I was rejecting.

Green and Deep

The wind whips daisies against granite.
They flutter their petals like signals.
We're going to the home place, Julia.

The pear tree blooms across the corner
where the yardman keeps his muddy shovels.
It's green and deep at the home place, Julia.

Here the grasshopper whirrs and snaps.
At dusk the locusts saw and chant.
They eat up summer at the home place, Julia.

The dead sleep side by side;
chaste pine planks keep them properly placed,
singular in this quiet home place, Julia.

At night, in the damp, black grass, over
and over the young wrap around each other.
We're wanted at the home place, Julia.

Now, one last look at Evergreen
Graveyard. We know every marker's name.
It's hard to leave this home place, Julia.

The Green Dress

In a store she touched a green dress,
But she couldn't buy it. —
James Galvin

I am the girl who wanted the dress,
and it was my sister, my mother, my grandmother,
my great-grandmother, Margaret Anna Watkins —
we all wanted it,
though we found out, eventually,
that it doesn't matter.
Maybe the girl coming will get the dress
and then find out it doesn't matter.
Daughter, Grace Anna,
I give you pine-green velvet,
green lace like shade under the locust tree,
taffeta that rustles like striated leaves of corn,
and a real, apple-green satin dress
to wear to the party for dancing.

Grief

For R.Y.B.*

Little Brother, if the Bear King meditates
about your dear one, gone before,
if the winter eagle struts across Mississippi's ice,
barefoot, feeling nothing, you have felt too much.
(We bleed from the same wound and Alice is still grieving.)
Questions, cold flesh, useless hands, unknown instances.
The eagle's red eyes will not divulge secrets.
He sees the thermal updrafts in the incandescent air,
rides his own inclinations, screams his own language.
There are many tongues we do not understand.
Even fish have their own reticence, their own reflections.
The bear is not ungraceful. He moves on oiled hinges,
faster than we can run. He knows honey,
disdains bees, sleeps through the bitter months.
In spring his claws turn upward silently
every morning after he tears out his heart
and divides it among the hungry.

Note

Ray Young Bear.

Habanero Beer

The Arawaks brewed beer
from hot habanero peppers
When the Spaniards come,
their armor reflects the sun,
makes them shine like gods,
but their mouths are pale,
their throats weak.
They say the brew flames their lips,
burns their palates,
loosens teeth in their jaws.

Their great horses trample
thatched huts, break the vats
hollowed out from tree trunks,
spill the pepper beer;
its foam pours out on sand;
the sea licks its froth
into sea foam, still gives back its ghost,
stinging my skin where I swim
at Cancun.

It does not give
back those brown people,
nor their holy rituals:
waving the mystic
blue-green feathers of birds,
stroking the ruby-eyed, sacred jaguar.

Half Children

Half children, I feel your half light.
You are shut up in the soft purse,
and you will not be born.

In the fields, umbrels of Queen Anne's lace
sift whiteness across the grass.
In the creek, speckled trout gorge
on mayflies, leap at sundown,
sending water messages against
the ferny banks.
I feel the falling snow of petals,
your somnolent turns making small ripples.
Children who will never leap
in the womb,
sometimes in the dark,
I see the faint phosphorescence
of your hands.

Hard Times

Time will tell, but it doesn't tell much,
but silent or voluble, since Time marches on,
and tempus fugit, or as Aunt Delia used to say,
"tempus fidgets." We ought to get ourselves in gear
because Time and Tide wait for no man,
although in order to live the examined life,
we have to stop and smell the flowers,
even if we march to a different drummer.
Still, time is money, and money is handy,
although love is dandy. At the end
it's Time's Up when all we really want
is Time Out.

Hazel Daniels' Treasures

Obese, her waist encircled by great rolls
of fat like giant doughnuts; her upper arms
hanging over her elbows, her legs
tree trunks, her ankles rippling
over her shoes. She moved slow,
an enormous fat caterpillar
inching toward us four-year-old urchins
in Sunday School. Infinitely patient,
she persuaded Kenny Ralph to finally
put his penny in the collection plate.
Taught us Bible verses and gave us gold stars.
When she was about to die, gave away
her treasures. She brought a green glass basket
to me and I looked at her through its
curved and bubbled sides where she became
elongated, slim, a mermaid swimming away.
through the green glass water.

Hearing Heaven Early

The two of us settle down on our pillows
late at night, three harps in the house still
practicing,
two daughters in their rooms, "Joy to the World,"
and "Hark the Herald," and down the hall the
teacher
from the University who stays at our house
during the Christmas season, all the old hymns,
"Angels We Have Heard on High."

Heart Pine

Eight coats of enamel on these old floors:
cloud grey, battleship grey; oak, which is
a sick orange, forest green, mud pie brown;
pink! and John Deere green. Soaking, spraying,
scraping, I peel them off, find varnish
and mahogany stain at the earliest layer.
One hundred years ago someone tried
to make common pine look elegant.

Then you trundle the rented sander.
It growls like bears
disturbed in hibernation.
Down in its dusty throat it complains,
but finally gnaws away a whole 30 gallon
trash can of sawdust.

You lay a two-by-four over the hump
in the living room, beat it with a sledge hammer.
One-hundred-year-old dust rises. Now
its cramp is massaged away and it lies as flat
as the day it was laid.

Smooth, natural, we coax the grain
of the wood into daylight, white and brown.
Filler comes next, pushed into cracks,
the residue wiped away with a wet cloth,
and I think about wiping away sins,
still the plastic wood in the chinks
remains like experience, even forgiven
experience.
You cannot unlive it.
I'm down on my knees again, sanding with fine
sandpaper by hand. Wipe away dust. Then I slip
the brush through the first coat of varnish,
laying down strokes that Matisse would have
envied.
Another hand sanding and wiping;
oh, I know each board, and its grain, every knot,
every small pattern of flecks and striations.
Varnish brings out the true color of the pine,
yellow and pink at the heartwood. I put down
two more coats, sanding and waiting a week
between each.
Finally, we step back, survey our acres of floor,
take off our shoes with respect, with reverence,
and dance in our stocking feet, whirling
and gliding across the fine, bright surface.

Heavy

in memory of Annette Watkins

When Augustus returned to Rome
after the capture of Egypt,
he could not bring back Antony or Cleopatra,
but he did exhibit a two-ton rhinoceros
in the triumphal procession.
Can you imagine the sailors
on the boat that brought it
across the Mediterranean?
Can you imagine how they boarded it
on the boat in the first place?
Heavy.

When Leopold of Belgium built his conservatory,
the Duke of Arenberg offered him palms
that had outgrown his greenhouse.
Some were more than 42 feet long.
One Tahitian weighed more than 24 tons.
They came by night in wagons
each drawn by 20 horses.
Heavy.

When I consider the souls of my dead friends
whether they still exist in some other dimension,
different from the sweetness of memory,
their lightness like the miniscule grams
of ice crystals forming pillars beside winter's sun,
I remember them in their new weightlessness,
but inside my ribs is a great heaviness.

Helen and Menelaus

Farm wives remember the old batch on the
Simpson place,
In '52 he sent for a young mail-order bride. She
came
by train from New Orleans with her whippet
to the wind-swept farm. No neighbors for five
miles, winter wrapping the clapboard house
with tissues of snow tied with ropes of wind,
husband tracking in mud and manure
only the blizzard for music.
No dancing, no fish except tinned sardines
he brought from town when the January
thaw came. He was a man of stooped shoulders,
pot
belly. The hired hand's muscular back rippled
beneath his blue cambric shirt, his narrow waist
cinched with a wide belt, a brass buckle —
the dog liked him too.
She ran off with him, of course.
The old husband didn't send
the cops after her —s he left him his ring,
the gold sewing box, the child.

The nearby women felt responsible,
said they were sorry they hadn't neighbored
with her. They shook their heads, clicked their
tongues
and maybe some secretly envied her.

High School Reunion

Seven hundred people packed into the school
gym,
July, no air-conditioning, and you
call my name. Drawn toward each other,
just as our fingers touch,
the speaker's mike goes dead, lights disappear,
leaving only a dim glow from high windows.
We laugh at the immense power between us.

A wild electron suggests we could reinvent the
past,
erase the tape, start over at sixteen when my
father
wouldn't let you take me to the sophomore party.

Our hands make a complete connection —
radio waves, TV waves, a FAX to Greenland,
a color-coded, digital print-out to Japan,
intergalactic radio star transmissions!

But before harsh basketball lights
flash us back into the practical present,
my husband waiting at the door, your wife
at home, we say goodbye again and again
to what surges between us.

Hiking Specimen Mountain

To help lift my Lowland self up
this vertical trail
I grasp gnarled root handholds,
grab pitch-sticky pine trunks,
sharp edges of rocks, anything.
My knees rubber; my lungs breathing
ice crystals' sharp edges.
You stride ahead, wait for me,
rest, look down on marshy meadow
buttered with yellow mallows beside Trail Ridge.
We emerge into cool sun where banner trees
clutch granite. Above us, tundra switchbacks,
rocky ridges, saddle marked with cairns.
Wind wrestles here, hollers, screams, shouts.
We bend against its giant arm. Find Crater's
rim, the enormous bowl below filled
with reclusive Big Horn ewes and lambs.
We pass binoculars back and forth.
Lambs rock-jump, frisk, fling
their hind legs into the air.
We could observe
mothers watching children in the park at home,
climbing jungle gyms, daring each other
like these delicate fawn-colored ones.
We could sit on iron benches bolted to concrete
in careful rows. With these rare creatures
we must move little. Never approach.
Take the pictures that are given to us,
as we take each day with its own delights:
a little delicacy, a quick dance on the boulders,
a scamper to nowhere, morning and evening,
its own shy pleasures.

Home Country

I will remember request a dirt lane down to the crick*
and a meadowlark on a fence post
singing his reedy spring aria
to a green pasture of satisfied milk cows the color
of cream on the way to the school
that has geography books and a map
of faraway places and a library
and an old brick church with a solid, square belfry,
and women in the church basement cooking up
harvest supper, farm women who know
right from wrong and who won't put up with
any swearing from kids and who would
wash out your mouth with soap if you tell a lie.

Note

For crick see "Cricks."

Home Place

The long striated leaves in the corn field rustled
in the night wind. That was before crops were
planted
fence row to fence row, no room for an orchard
an old house for six children, no room for the
upstairs window
where a skinny teen girl was reading by moonlight
when she heard three fledging hoot owls,
whoo, whoo, whooo, the cry of lost children,
Lost, lost, lost, who?

Hospital des Invalides
Paris

Old men on the benches
sitting by the espaliered pear trees
outside your barracks, your crutches
and walkers beside you.
Did you serve at Chateau Thierry?
did you fight at Belleau Wood?
Monsieurs, connaissiez-vous le soldat
Americain qui s'appelait Freddy?
They called him the kid.
Blond hair, blue eyes.
He was my father.

He said little about the War,
but at night it revisited him,
and he screamed in his sleep,
waking himself to the quiet dark
of the Iowa farm.

Once he told me, with amazement and regret,
how all the trees were splintered, split and pocked
by shells — he didn't say what shells had done
to men. He said Chateau Thierry below the wood
the roar of cannon shook
the ground. He said Big Bertha.

One Armistice Day he was plowing
when suddenly the tractor backfired.
He jumped, hit the ground instinctively
while the dumb machine lumbered on,
spoiling the straight furrows.

Monsieurs, camarades, connaissiez-vous
le soldat Americain qui s'appelait Freddy?

Houseboating on the Mississippi

We haul anchor, ease away
from sand bar camp site.
Grey whorls of mist this morning;
barges coast past like ghosts.
Somewhere in the fog and night
Huck and Jim lost the mouth of the Ohio;
sun suffuses the whispy vapor willow-green,
fern green, Grannie Smith apple green,
chartreuse; we drift into pointillism,
sing say Seurat, Seurat. More light,
air turns forget-me-not blue.
This is Paul Signac; we sail The Seine at Herbly.
No breeze; spatters of light lace the wake.
At eleven our boat enters
Renoir's Seine at Argenteuil.
atmosphere clear, bank intensified
with red and brown brush strokes,
in the distance a melting steeple.
Noon sun burns off fog, condenses
every color until its life rises in heat waves,
shimmers, glows: African red, Caribbean orange,
Tahitian pink. we have come a long way,
lost the mouth of tomorrow, lost yesterday
except in art where it is caught forever,
the hues changing in the changing light.

Houses

for David Mohr (1942-1990)

The flesh of the dead feels like skin
stretched over stone. Soft lips set
in a half smile, half welcoming death,
half sad to say good-by. I look at your beard,
your hair at the temples, turning grey;
it will not turn further. Oh turn
and come back from the glacial North of silence,
from the city of the dead,
from the enormous gathering of ancestors.

Remember wind rattling palm fronds
on the beach at Cozumel,
the house built from tree trunks
lashed together, roof of corrugated tin,
floor dirt. That little house
is finer than your stone mansion now.
Small children run in and out the door.
The mother washes their white clothes,
rubbing them on a washboard propped in a tub
under the vines. The father comes home
at sunset, riding the donkey, a load of hay
piled behind him. Slowly she rubs.
Slowly he ambles.
But there is nothing as slow as you.
It will be a million years before you finish your
smile.

How Can I Come to Resignation?

In another time,
amethysts tossed carelessly from Lake Michigan,
the bloated cheeks of seaweed on Mustang
Island,
children probe for clams off Owl's Head,
a woman of no discernible age, tough as rope,
rows her wooden dingy to her traps
while this life rewrites itself every minute
shape of the knowable past erodes the beach,
repositions itself in diminished fashionable forms
Human frailty is not a phase
the old friend can discuss only her ailments
her pacemaker, her bowel movements
funerals become a black dress, a rainy afternoon
the grey-haired children do not know
what to do with their useless hands
a sonorous sermon
the organ, acquainted with Thomas Hardy's bird,
trills its ignorance, its mechanical bliss
all unprotected in the drive of time
Music knows more than its notes, its stalls
and stops, knows the rafters of the old church
and all the memories that depend there.

How to Run a Police State by Vladimir Putin

If there's opposition, they'll create
ways to block you — mortify them, berate:
they're Pocahontas, Ugly, Stupid, Horseface.
That's the way to run a proper state.

Arrest the opposition, don't let them state
their agenda. Lock them up, slam the gate.
Thinkers — always troublemakers — degenerates.
That's the way to run a proper state.

Reward the sycophants who call you great.
Make lots of money for yourself and friends.
Create
fear. Rule with iron claws, always prevaricate
That's the way to run a proper state.
.
Assassinate, assassinate. I cheer, assassinate!
When they still won't shut up. eliminate!
Poison children, kidnap wives don't hesitate!
That's the way to run a proper state.

Hunting Mushrooms

We walk through bare woods, the pale green
leaflings
just beginning to crack the smooth brown cases
of winter. The merest hint of color,
like a silk scarf caught in the almost shut drawer.
We kick aside last year's leaves, search for the
elusive
sponge-like morel. I think of it washed, rinsed,
patted dry, sizzling in butter in the pan. The
Czechs
call it hobie, took comfort in it,
a reminder of home here in Cedar Rapids,
where they came after first trying to find work
in Michigan, many of them pulling all their goods
in hand carts. They brought their violins; the
women
brought their red skirts and embroidered aprons
for feast days- Wrapped carefully in linen towels,
they brought ruby red cut glass goblets. In the
woods
I still hear their music, the tunes they sang,
danced to, see the shine of the violins,
as rich as they were poor,
the great suppers of mushrooms
heaped high on platters like steaks.

I Came to the River at Mozier

through the hump-hill town'
to the scraggled landing, clay,
packed white, and woods, the ferry
unpainted, nondescript, was waiting.
The metal gangplank clanked down,
and I drove aboard. It was
a raft with an engine, and the old geezer
in the ramshackle pilot house. He
took his time starting the engine,
the boy who helped him
slowly uncoiled the faded line,
once flaxen like a girl's hair, now brown
with river water, silt and time.
I have grown old, too, and we
cast off. The river, wide, Huck Finn,
and the current moody, swift
with its own errands.

Ice Breaking Up on the Mississippi

> The rigidities yield —like ice in March
> the magic month. William Carlos Williams

This morning the ice flows are lumpy, jagged,
a collage of shapes, not smooth shards
from a shattered pane but white islands
with hills, mountains, valleys.

A bald eagle perches
on one shaped like New Zealand.
It careens atop the impatient current;
eagle pilots it, impervious
as the iron Case bird, grasping a globe,
knows he owns the air, ice, water, fish,
searches for something on the hills
of steel-blue snow, then lifts and hitches
onto a thermal current and writes Palmer Method
ovals in the air above black brush branches
inking their lines along the shore.

I look up from my morning coffee,
the rigidities giving way,
freeing a word here and there, a moment.

Ice Fishing On The Mississippi

Inside the fish house
black, black out of the wind
the augured ellipse
in the twelve-inch ice glows,
light comes from the river, blue,
cold, and fish fin slow,
ignoring the bait,
suspended in liquid light
safe from leaping summer
and strange meat.
Here in the slick light
I slip
into the eye of the fish,
down, down into the deeper pools
of the water, move into the underground river
far below the crust
which flows through the unknown country.

Note

Published in *The Greenfield Review* and in *Out of this World*, a collection edited by Gary Gildner.

I Forget

I forget my indiscretions
and take comfort in pine cones.
I forget my spelling, my modicum of poor French,
my car keys. Some days I forget my name.

I forget the road and the destination,
The Way and the Detour,
silver bells and the lost clappers,
the broken grates, the run-over shoes,
the colors of indifference,
and all the beggars I never gave to.

I forget the slippery slights,
the lily bulbs the voles consumed all winter,
the time I wasted on thinking
and the hours I gave to fools.

I forget that silly girl
I used to be. She is the sound
of trumpets fading and the color of time.
I forget how sad she was
and how happy.

Indian Shores Beach
the Week Before Christmas

The days have been sunny, warm, and Jupiter
at night, close to Venus, makes a Christmas star.
But today the sea is grey-green; far out
breakers curl, pour in foaming at the mouth.
A pale mist pushes cool against my hair.
This is a day of caution and despair.
But I don't have to conjure up a sun
in my smile. I can, like the Great Heron
hunched on the ridgepole, keep a weather eye
for the worst. I've seen someone I love die
on a day like this. And all days since are
empty. I move in circles. But the star
proceeds toward old, cruel Bethlehem,
where any miracle can still happen.

In Iowa I think of Iceland

Outside the window, snow in drifts
like an Arab sheik's flowing robes,
a coverlet of glitter over the lawn,
ugly box elder trees gowned in sequins,
twigs with rhinestoned gloves,
and the fire hydrant wears a shiny silk turban.

Under all this frippery
the brown and brittle grass does not care.
The old, indifferent dirt,
embroidered with the footprints
of jack rabbits and buffalo,
does not laugh or weep whether I walk here, or
dance,
or stumble; the ancient globe
keeps its own fashions,
and far below the thin crust
a great hot magma throbs —
sometimes sends out red ribbons
to decorate the ephemeral snow.

January Fashions [Reusing the first stanza of "In Iowa I think of Iceland.]

Outside the window snow in drifts
like flowing robes of an Arab sheik,
the lane shut, traffic hushed,
a coverlet of glitter over the lawn,
ugly box elder trees gowned in sequins,
twigs with rhinestoned gloves,
and the fire hydrant wears a white silk turban.

An Incomplete Encyclopedia
of Happiness and Unhappiness
(title stolen from Amy Newman)

Happiness

Marshmallow candy pillowing a ring
already turning green, only 5 cents,
dancing merry-go-round horses lilting up and down
and around while the calliope whistled and drummed magic,
strait pens with steel nibs
dipped into the little glass well
built into the Scripto bottle of purple ink,
climbing the apple tree, sitting on the Greening's branch
with Evelyn Dettman, my best friend, pretending
we were Amelia Earharts. We flew that apple tree,
we flew.

Unhappiness

On the farm
the gander who chased me when I had to
cross the yard out to the Mrs. Jones,
his heavy wings beating my legs, pincer beak nipping,
Miss Hoglum, who threw my bouquet of dandelions
in the first-grade waste basket,
balcony over the school gym floor —
afraid I'd slip or throw myself down,
the scorn of my sister when I couldn't chop off the rooster's head.
I held his legs, but looked away.) I couldn't wield the scoop shovel
to kill the rats rummaging in the hog feed. But she could,
and she was right. My father's rages — the beating.
To write this was not easy. At 81 none of it matters.
It all matters.

Insomnia

Mice in the walls
keep me awake at night, crumbling plaster
tumbles three stories.
Sweat from bad dreams, horses
rear and plunge. The dark light
from the bottom of the well crawls out.
The hired man spits Copenhagen
between his teeth, a brown stain in the snow.
A cow trails afterbirth, blue-white and bloody.

A rat gnaws nodules
oozed through the lath, at the white convolutions
of the brain, skips electric
out of control in the dark.

Interstice

Gate swings open and shut; tide lips in,
slurps out; wind blows where
it pleases. It brushes tree tops with its great hand.
Nothing lasts, and all this, too, shall pass away.
If you resist, your resistance is futile,
almost always futile, but I know you —
you think there's a chance between the almost
and the always.

In the Bull's Eye

Thunder threatens.
I don't know how accurate is
his lightning javelin.

In the market place in Mombasa

the coffee vendor's brass pot
shimmers from charcoal heat
and the dark smell of coffee.
A parchment-colored ancient fusses,
making sweet chi. A boy lays slabs of dried shark meat
under an awning, and further down two old men
arrange piles of lemons, oranges and coconuts.
Then a half-mad Swahili scrapes
a piece of reverberating tin across the stones,
and when the people gather, tells the news.
He heard it on the radio, from his friends;
maybe he reads the paper. "Walesia in jail
in Poland," he yells; "priest murdered
in El Salvador." He wipes away a tear.
I think it's real. "British troops shot
before the cathedral in Londonderry..
The poor lads," he says. "Twenty dhows
in port this week; oh, the ladies are happy,"
he cackles and scrapes the tin violently
so the crowd will give him money.
His eyes roll and saliva spurts between
his teeth, rolls down his chin. I toss
a dime on the stones for the mad news,
for the price of sanity.

Iowa Farm Wife in Louisiana

Here I walk under the live oaks festooned
With Spanish moss,
But there is still a frugal
Northern feeling.

I know pines, cradling
The snow, and elms
Scratching the Halloween
Sky. And before these,
Box elders and cottonwoods.
I know how they talk: Their leaves, dry
And covered with dust, little grey
Tongues whispering for rain.

And in the winter
When the cold comes out of Kansas,
Stinging through the heartwood,
The tree breaks with a huge cracking,
They white center turned open
To the white moon.
I know what breaking sounds like
in the night.

Tell about the live oaks, the fringed
Palms, but they are foreign
Trees. I have not been under
Their bark. Their juice
Is not in me.

Iowa Gardener Considers Orchids

I think about those selfish parasites,
orchids, living in luxury and lust
on someone else's lifeblood. They are curst
with beauty, prized only for their outsides.
The satin labrum; swollen lip; stamens'
gold dust; petals like spotted adder's tongue;
all this is overrated. Their fame sprung
from connoisseurs who don't care what's stolen,
appropriated, plagiarized. True roots
grow deep; leaves photosynthesize labor,
work from daylight til dark, beneficent,
responsible, no jungle voodoo pout,
or magic-growth-from-air-exotic flowers,
but plain daisies, lettuce, beans, corn, spearmint.

Iowa in August

It's so hot popcorn pops itself
eggs don't fry on the sidewalk —
they're already boiled in the shell.
Icebergs have taken a bath,
polar bears are shedding their coats,
all ideas are half baked.
Hot jazz has melted the horns,
love is so hot that couples get 2nd degree burns
from touching each other.
It's so hot, the devil asked to borrow
a little heat from us;
we could teach him a thing or two.

Iowa July

Sky copper, bronze, white hot. Sun all day
Chili pepper wind out of the south. Even dust
between my toes was hot.

The stock tank the only body of water,
where farm animals drank —
thick old cement, oblong, almost big enough
for a swimming pool,
sides covered with green velvet moss.
fed by silver trickles from the pump's metal mouth.
After priming, after lifting and pushing down
its iron arm twenty times — dry gargles,
tardy humph humph; finally water gushes
from another world that's cold.

Sometimes I dared to dangle my hands
in its green coolness,
watch my mirror face wrinkle
in small waves from my fingers.
"Horse won't drink disturbed water," Father
frowned. He knew what I wanted.
I could not sit on the edge and dangle my feet in it.
Mother sided with him, afraid I'd drown.
Still, Lars Johansen had shown me the bull heads
swimming in their stock tank, had stripped off his shoes
and shirt and splashed in, dumping handfuls of water
over his blond head and laughing.

Note

Struthers left this poem heavily revised in pencil. I cannot be sure that I correctly interpreted her revisions.

Iowa's Winter Wind

The wind sings, "Brace yourself, stand up, fight.
Don't let the sting of Saskatchewan turn you away."
It hisses, "Sissy, Sissy, Sissy,"
It haloos down the chimney, "Yukon, Yukon, Yukon."
When you open the door you hear it scouring the yard
yelling, "Hudson Bay, Hudson Bay," calling to wake
the sled dogs, make them leap from their igloos.
You come around a corner and it's screaming,
"Arctic Circle, Arctic Circle, Arctic Circle."
You tell it California, Florida, Bermuda.
You tell it warm up, shut up, blow off.

And it does sometime in April.

I Remember

I remember Shorty Simpson, old batch
Few visitors at our farm. My sister and I, two and three, shy.
We hid our faces, watched him through our fingers.
He pulled a red handkerchief from his pocket,
turn and tuck and presto, it was a mouse.
He let it peek out from the pocket of his jeans jacket
magic for children he'd never have.

I remember the square boxes and their buzz.
Honey on pancakes.
The errant bee that stung me
The mud Father daubed over the sting.

I remember sliding down the only small hill
on a scoop shovel, playing fox and goose,
Delbert Johnson who fell in the pond on the playground
on the day the ice began to crack.

I remember writing my first poem
as soon as I learned to write.
Miss Hoglum looked at it
and said, "Hrummpf, it doesn't rhyme."
I knew she didn't think it was a real poem.
But I was a bad child, and although I was too scared
to say it, I knew she was wrong.

I remember
my dog, Popeye
mongrel, white rat terrier
with brown spots. Nobody loved him
except me, and when I thought nobody
loved me, he came and licked my hands.

Evelyn and I sailed our airplane
in the Greening apple tree. We flew
beside Amelia Earhart's plane,
with her and her navigator,
although our parents didn't approve,
but we knew Amelia could do no wrong
and she would be found, be found.

I See Them Now Old Friends and Lovers

I see them now from the corner of my eye,
flickering, just around the corner, coming and
going
through the window, through the closed door,
curtains drawn, and the fire turned up,
old friends, old comrades, from old times
how I loved you, and how I love you more now
that we are separated forever, or maybe not.

Now the hem of a dress, sleeve of a plaid shirt
appears, or almost appears.
In a year of diminution, days of loss,
you come like the wine of Cana
brimming with mysterious cheer, even in winter.
You do not speak, but you are real in the way
that only the very old understand,
the line between real and unreal worn thin now.
Because it is a surprise, looking back, how unreal
life has been,
shocking with pleasure, with beauty, ever the
sound of words,
Shakespeare's "humble bee" Wordsworth's
"Grasmere,"
Colorado's "Ozel Falls," oh, that "z"
walking under water like the little grey bird.

Dear ones, I remember you; how vital you were,
how we would change the world, and how the
world*
turned us onto its old path of obdurate stones.

Still, we watched how the light of the passive
moon
and its clutch of stars, depended on the sun
coming
and going, and held love that never leaves,
only changes, water to steam,
steam to rain, not falling now
on your beautiful grass green graves.

Note

Struthers penned several ideas for revising this
and the previous stanza, but I am not able to make
out exactly what she wrote nor where the changes
might have been placed.

I See What I Want
after Darwish

I see what I want of the field,
red clover perfuming the Great Middle Farms,
bees gone mad, hives pulsating,
new colonies swarming the honeyed air.

I see what I want of the sea
writing long line poems on the shore
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
a whole book twice a day, Whitmanesque.

In the mountains I see what I want
^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^
of the clouds, curled and cumulus,
poaching embers of setting sun for the east.
Sunset in the EAST! peach and gold
why not? the world turned backwards.

I see what I want of the night,
sweet vermillion stepping stones
on dark blue,
golden and rose. Beneath them
another day going out
in silent glory,
stars coming on stage
through the dark curtains.
****

I see what I want of books
that are worth everything
even the mediocre ones. [] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] []

I see what I want of the soul,
my own tattered rag, although I know
Gandhi and Mother Theresa; I studied the Gospel
++++++++++++++++++++
but I am stupid and weak and love comfort.

I see what I want of grandmothers
and how they mellow and take the years
like yarn for their knitting, making something
out of all of it.
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

I Write This Under Protest

The star folk insist in their spangled lingo
that I tell you they love pink plastic flamingo
lawn ornaments, the oval shape, the single

black leg stance, stiletto beak, elegant curve
of the neck. They drive out on Sundays to observe
yard and garden art. Sometimes they return
unnerved

or mystified: The wooden old woman
as she bends to weed, displaying her bloomers —
they aren't certain, but they think it's humor.

The statue of Mary, who may be in distress
under half an up-ended bath tub — they express
their bewilderment and would rescue her if asked.

They love wind socks, flags, running whirligigs,
cream separator cones my Uncle Albert rigged
in wheels, and weather vanes with arrows and fat
pigs.

Tuesday Noon in the Middle of January, 2010

and I'm sitting in good health in my third floor office
looking out over the crab apple trees on the
college lawn
toward St. Luke's Hospital. Last year a Cooper's
Hawk
perched on a low limb, intent for the retarded
robins
who hang around all winter. Today only the red
berries
and a squirrel sorting through the windfalls. Across
the street
on a snow bank two crows beside the parking lot.
An ambulance pulls in; an ambulance pulls out,
and I think about quake-shocked Haiti and the
doctor there,
telling the TV so far no rain, no cholera, mostly
because
the dead bodies in the ruins are being eaten by
rats,
disposing of the contamination, nature intent
on its mandatory course, and here the twa corbies
have found no dead knight, no hawk, hound,
no fair leman, not the bad one
who has already run off with another man,
or the good one who carries his body to the grave.
Oh rats of Haiti, your sumptuous feast preserves
millions
although we weep, we shudder for the immobilized
dead,
crushed and molding, and for the innocent living,
and even the guilty, for an earth shaken
and still shaking.

January 21, 2010

Squirrel in snow grades
crab apples' red berries as
if they were rubies.

Jesus as Tourist

> In Damascus a local legend says that when Jesus returns he will appear on the third minaret of the Omayyed Mosque, part of which was formerly a Christian church.

I think when Jesus comes again to
set a thousand years of sweet peace in motion
he will oblige. On the third minaret
of the Omayyed Mosque, like Saint Simeon

the Stylites, he'll appear, his robe
saffron, just to please the Damascenes.
Then he'll descend to open this long clogged
well's mouth, fill the stone font, weep at the screen

by the grave of his cousin John's head; find
the grey granite wall where the strong basket
holding Paul was lowered, kneel at chapel
in Ananias' basement; pray the blind
receive new sight, drop coins in the casket
for the poor, emerge into sunlight, dazzled.

Note

Another version of this poem appears in *My Aleppo*.

Joe

I see you, Joe, in Bay City, Michigan,
six years old, growing so fast
your pant legs always too short.
You run up and down the lane,
consumed by running's pure joy,
Ricky, your big, dumb Huskie,
barking away the end of winter.

March wind off Lake Huron
strong enough to lift you
like a kite. You unzip your
blue jacket, let it flare out
behind you, filling like a sail.
Skim across spring grass,
legs move smooth as water.
A perfect little inland boat,
you breeze along the fence,
tack across the field,
towing your dog.

Joe, Las Vegas, and the World
For your first year at college

Today the world is calling to you — loud.
It's garish neon lights flicker and flash,
It's traffic hums, its glittering rewards
Are hanging just above your head. Quick cash!

Win, win! It offers pleasure, ease, fast gain,
The lonely path through fields and woods is dull
For one so young and handsome.
No pain
On the broad easy road, excitement pulls

Like roller coaster thrills — the carnival
Never ends it says, Have fun!
Dear Joe
The scholar's path is also festival,
Delights from fresh concepts, new worlds to know
In their exquisite multiplicity —
Ideas charged with electricity!

Jordan Cecilia Among Angels and Shepherds

Jordan Cecilia, three years old, stands among angels,
and shepherds in the great church sanctuary
wears her velvet dress, gold trimmed. Her pale
hair shines without a tinsel halo. See
her turn, observe, not overcome with awe
or song, like a wise one from the East
Her smile says she draws conclusions
from clouds of glory in the past.

Peace has not come the way the shepherds hoped,
spread like soothing oil across the world.
It eludes the pure, disgusts the vicious.
War's dark dead accuse us, child.
Tonight this old pageant says star
of hope and those who watch you
with love, know that it says, too
Easter's cross of wood.

Just Before Daybreak
(after Thom Gunn)

With a whish like theater curtains parting,
they appear, uncertain and wavering,
their feet not quite touching the ground,
or the floor, or the firmament beneath them.

Some are old friends, some are my kin,
some ancestors unknown, deep in the shadows,
some with illustrious names, one or two notorious,
some were my mentors, unknown to them
whom I met only in the pages they wrote,
some wear crowns of laurel, some crowns of parsley,
but all of them with the inscrutable past
wrapped around them, folk
I had thought lived only in their constricted orbits.
"They remind me, distant now."

They do not say if they are at rest
or are still restless. They do not say whether
they know more than they did when they walked the earth
or whether they should have read more books or less,
or made love more often, celebrated more parades,
drank more beer or more champagne.
They do not say, and they turn now and fade, turn toward
the inscrutable dark, as I turn toward the ignorant day.

I am not positively certain whether they came or went,
but there is now a great hush over the fields
and only one star hugs the horizon.

Keeping the Spirit

Rumi says to keep the spirit high in a tree's
branches,
so today mine is riding the top of the Small Leaf
Linden,
snow pasted on the trunk's north side, every
branch
outlined in Canaletto white, every twig
fluttering heavy white eyelashes. This is February
in Iowa.

In summer I stash my spirit in the willow
overhanging the bank of Big Spirit's Back Bay,
where the white pelicans have their nest.
There the willow holds its green-gold head
to the bright, crystalline air, and trails its lower
branches
in the water, making a hiding shade
for the female mallard and her dozen
ducklings. She rests easy while they make
small fuzzy circles beneath the elliptical leaves
writing their own alphabet in the water.

I think Rumi knew the spirit is a wind harp
in the trees, playing music
that only other creatures can hear,
and once in a while, a note or two
in a lower register for us.

The Kindness of the Tropics

My next-door neighbor's philodendron,
its leaves the size of turkey platters,
strangles a tree.
Birds of Paradise, eight-feet tall, lift their bright
beaks
nip at the eaves. Bougainvillea, vamps the garden
wall
where tailor birds twitter.
Pots of orchids hang from the mango tree.
Oh parasites, oh tropics, how lovely,
how difficult to breathe at night, how deadly.

Kitchen Papers

My great-grandmother, Opal May Watkins,
would rather read than eat,
was poor, her house flimsy, winter winds
blasted through without invitation.
Like Dorothy Wordsworth, to keep out
the cold, she papered her kitchen
with old newspapers
given her by the rich farmer's wife.
She mixed flour and water and pasted them
upside down, "So I wouldn't read them,"
she said, "instead of doing my work—
thirteen kids make a lot of chores.

"But of course, I learned to read upside down;
over and over again I read those kitchen papers."

Lake Okoboji

We hang around the empty amusement park
like cobwebs behind the tattered signs,
dance in the echoing Roof Garden,
peer through the shutters
at the frozen lake where the fish
rock slow in their crystal cell.

The hangman, the horseman look for us.
Mice footprint spilled flour
at the Hi Ho Cafe.
The cold smell of winter blows away
the grease of hamburger onions.
We stoke the boilers of the *Queen*,
converted to diesel ten years ago. Veronica
and Tyrone make love on the hurricane deck.

The hangman, the horseman run out
on the public dock to catch us. We cast off,
the planks have been taken up. They fall
between the pilings, the whistle shrieks,
and we are young again,
going across the lake to Gull Point,
around the horn of the moon
and beyond.

The Last Line

when you're very old and tired, the last line
is like your mother calling you home
when you're seven and it's almost dark
and you don't want to go in, and you do.

1/23/19

Learning Discontent

We traveled to escape the wind
gnashing its winter teeth out of Manitoba.
We thought it would make us deeper,
more expansive, finer, tolerant,
our minds burnished by tombs and
castles.

We were right; we were wrong;
we broke the guitar, abandoned the piano,
purse poor and eyes rich, although
we can't remember it all:
the stone elephants pasturing at
Mahbalipuram,

a very British mist over the Indian hill station
above Darjeeling where guesthouse tea
boiled
until it screamed bubbles; the holy cows
ate our bananas, and we grew old
in an instant beside two leprosy beggars.

Sri Lanka's reclining Buddhas
did not rise up at Dambulla stupa,
hot coal walkers at Kandy did not
scorch their feet. Poya drums kept away
the evil spirits and the cobra protected
them.

London's bells of St. Clemens sang oranges
and lemons. Wild daffodils dallied
along the road to Harrogate.
York Minister's organ throbbed heather
and old oaks,
and we left Queen Anne's lace for Lake
Windermere.

Still, the little flat in Prague —
we leaned across the balcony's railing
to pluck the cherry tree's homage.
Charles Bridge statues levitated around
us,
though no other tourist remarked it.

Then Piraeus to Assos, sun setting
behind the broken pillars
of Point Sounion where Bryon
carved his initials and Neptune
did not arise to rebuke him.

The night we danced till four
at the wedding in Aleppo,
caught the early bus
past the Roman water wheels of Hama,
through ancient Horns all the way to
Damascus.

We still had home in our pockets,
Iowa tattooed on our foreheads,
though we could read mist and mirage,
speak falafel
and porgies, we no longer fit our old faces.
No one knew
what to call us, and we were changed and
not changed,
and we did not know how to define our
discontent.

Light Lifting in the Morning
for Stephen Meats

I'm lifting the fog slowly
until you can see the campgrounds
on the other side of Horse-shoe
Bay. Next I'll raise the curtain
on Templar Park. Minnewaukon
is still shrouded, and beyond,
Angler's Run. After an hour
I'll illuminate a smudge
on the horizon that will emerge
like a photograph
from the developer's pan:
the South Shore, Little Red Nose,
and McClellan's Beach.
A great blue heron flies
along the beach, kingfisher
sits on a piling, alert
for his breakfast,
while I go about
the most important
business of the day.

The Lighthouse and Marriage

The first time she saw a lighthouse
tall, white, thrusting into the blue sky,
the way she had dreamed it —
like the impending marriage,
the illumination of loneliness
and night, set on a granite foundation,
and the sea going past all day.

The lighthouse beacon
turns, seems to blink on and off;
it must be kept fed; it is always hungry
for kerosene for the generator.
It is a symbol of danger;
under the bright surface,
the rocks of despair, the shoals,
oh, the subterranean shoals.

Lillian Despondent

I phone on New Year's Day.
Lillian is despondent. Her cataracts
not ripe and she can't read The Register
without a huge magnifying glass. Her one ear
deaf,
a hearing aid in the other, but the rumble
from her new furnace is threatening.
It keeps making terrible noises,
and when it turns on, something goes clear
through
her body. It's giving off bad currents, mean
waves,
outer-space vibrations. It makes her sick
to her stomach. She told the doctor
she's going crazy or it's her nerves.
"I never took nerve medicine before," she says,
has taken valium for years. He gives her
another prescription. She expects
the meals-on-wheels lady any minute.
I try to think of something cheerful to say,
only the invisible rays of the microwave tower
that sends the telephone signals five hundred
miles
linking us, and that other old tie
that makes me hang up and weep.

Long Dreams

My pony is shod with clouds
Pete Sandervedt beat them out
on his wild goose anvil

before his forge of time and space,
his leather apron pocked by sparks
he gentles the beast, lifts the foot slowly
his hammer taps out the music
of cumulus, strata, of horse tail clouds,
and we will ride more discreetly than Icarus,
than the horses of Phaeton,
easy over the horizon, over the poison
fumes of Vesuvius, over Everest,
over Fuji and the wild peaks of Montana.

Long dreams and long sleeps,
the wind in my hair
and comets sweeping along beside me.

A Long Way to Town

A red one-room school house
hunkered down in the green field
windows and doors boarded up
gravel road riding into town
enormous sky blooms above flat plains
stretching toward nowhere
it might be Kansas or Nebraska
or the interior lives of many of us
someplace lonesome full of empty spaces

Lost Countries

Is this Odysseus going bald?
or Lancelot with sagging jowls?
an elderly Roy Rogers galloping
to rescue the rancher's gorgeous daughter?

No, this is ancient Adam snoring:
after the apple, after denial
he sleeps content. She lies awake
(five a.m.'s a ruthless hour),
for sooner or later every woman hates her
husband,
It lasts for a second, or a day, or a week,
or a hundred years
when she remembers Dodge and Ilium and
Camelot
and weeps for her lost, flame-fenced garden.

Lucky White Stones

These round, white, fist-sized rocks
from Spirit Lake are lucky,
luckier than the agates
you sometimes find on the beach
after a storm.
They like to be picked up, washed off,
taken inside and used for paper weights.
After their long tumble in the waves,
abraded by gravel day after day
and night after night, always moving,
always hurting, they are glad to be still,
glad to be finished.
They have come out of the grave
and are content now
on the desk with the yellow sun
shining on them, holding down piles of paper
against the careless breeze
that fills the white curtains like sails.

The Marrow

I sit in a plastic bubble space world that's wildly
Perfumed; is lacquered; is permeated
With blush-pink spray and never think.

The young man with comb and cruel
Curler is excellent. He does not
Simper, nor pat my shoulder. He says
His name is Tom Wilkins.

I ask if his grandfather farmed
Near Ruthven. "Yes," he says, "one of the first
Families to homestead on Lost Island Lake."

He makes the pouf just right, and is brushing
My bangs carefully. I get up
And walk out on him. Sons
Of pioneers should not
Turn hairdresser.

May Pole Dance

On the last day of school,
the senior girls wound the May Pole,
a wheel revolved on its high top,
trailing long pink and white streamers
which we girls held lightly, loosely,
the fabric like enormous J's,
while we walked slowly one way,
turned and reversed ourselves.
The gym teacher directed
the scratchy record player.
The music picked up speed and we skipped,
a kind of tease before the real thing.
Finally Miss Ross gave the signal
and all the girls with white turned left
and all the girls with pink turned right,
weaving in and out, constructing a checkerboard
pattern. The music quickened and we wove
faster, almost to the end of the streamers.
Miss Ross picked up the record-player's arm
for a moment of dramatic silence, and then we
glided,
moved backwards, unwound the pole
except for a few feet at the top,
a reminder that next year
girls would dance again.
Only once were we seniors,
only once could we dance the May Pole dance,
only ten minutes when we bound
the phallic symbol, wound it tightly,
bandaged our pattern
and our constraint upon it.

Museum of Fraudulent Medical Devices

Here is the miraculous wire helmet
that touches the skull lightly in thirty-two places,
transmits electrical impulses to the printer
recording one's mental capacity, spiritual qualities,
emotional nature, sexual powers.

Just beyond we find the cabinet
for light stimulation therapy
that reverses aging, transforms
middle aged chemistry, guarantees
teenage libido.

In the next glass case
an aerobic eye exercise device
includes instructions: "...walk like a bear
for ten minutes each morning.
As an aid to focusing, observe the far horizon
at dawn, follow the paths of clouds intently."

Here a hair-growing kit complete
with flashing neon lights; a breast enlarger
with enormous vacuum cups operated by a foot
pump,
penis elongator "perfect organ developing device,"
the box insists, its massager adapted
from a "secret Egyptian invention
found in King Tut's tomb."
We laugh at the innocents
who paid good money for these hoaxes.

Still, when I consider my own devices,
this faulty hand that refuses to do the good
I mean to do; my poor incompetent brain —
never understanding a billionth
of what it should;
my perverse spirit secretly loving the false,
hating the true, I glance at you, dear friend,
smile, hoping you can't see
how fraudulent I am.

Need for Ruins

Auden had his Roman wall,
Wordsworth, his ruined Abbey,
the old bridge at Venice, worn with footsteps,
the paved marble streets of Ephesus, grooved
by chariot wheels.
But here no rocks to anchor us to the past,
only miles of open wind, waves of prairie
where no stone clasped another,
where loneliness is larger than the open sky
where no house stood, no woman walked,
no man built and no child cried.

Neighbors, Little Spirit Lake, August Morning

Florence says that the hot weather
cooked the fish in the lake,
many dead ones washing up on shore.

Wearing her faded housedress and apron,
She has her old boat tipped over,
painting it with a new coat of red,
Florence with the fungus in her lungs
that Roger worried about,
Florence going back and forth to the hospital
in Sioux Falls. Roger thought she was going
to die, but she didn't, and Roger did,
cancer, and he went fast. I wanted
to talk to Florence about him this morning,
but she wouldn't say much.
We stood there in the August sun,
Awkward, looking across the lake to the cottage
that used to be his, the fish poles still hanging
on his porch, worms drying up in his bait box,
his Irish setter struck by a car. We couldn't save
her.
Both gone now, but Florence
is still working, fixing her boat, getting ready
to go fishing.

Neither Snow nor Sleet

There are two Oriental ways
of getting out of Hazelton, Iowa,
Kawasaki north, and Suzuki south.
In between the stores are boarded up,
dusty letters lie in lock boxes,
the grey postmistress, a Republican,
forgotten since Eisenhower.
The tavern's sign complains on rusty hinges;
the regulars still come, although the last good keg
was tapped in '52. The town's run out of future,
almost run out of past.
Corn and soy bean fields push in
against the snaggle teeth of ruined fences.
Charlie Chan, Anna May Wong and Philip Ahn
live in the closed picture show,
ride out on warm summer nights
to deliver the untranslatable mail.

New Star

The stars are put off by the Star Chamber,
by Charles I's tortures, by star-struck
girls; they cry at Juliet and Romeo's star-crossed
love. They adore Milky Way candy bars,
although the immature ones prefer Mars bars,
and baby stars love the explosions of Star Bursts.

They can't believe the prosecutor Starr
and his needle-nosed meddling,
needing to publish all the salacious ways
of seduction. What kind of star is he? A Brown
Dwarf?
Startled, staring, they wink and blink in
astonishment.
Poor earthlings, no perspective, no manners,
no decency. They keep their distance,
stay close to that which they love. Star light
isn't heavy; it sifts between the bars
of prurience. It lasts longer than palaces
and kings. After lust is a footnote,
the TV commentators and pious lawyers forgotten,
some cold star will still shine
somewhere as bright as civility.

Night

Gloriosa daisies, as dark comes on,
shine more brightly than fireflies,
shine like icon suns,
their petals radiating grace.

Morning

Lying on the living room floor
to keep cool,
she wakes from sleep
have one hot July morning.
Early sun diffused through white shades
outlines the hunchback harp,
triple arches of sofa,
white curve of his shoulder;
she moves over, lying against his back
in the mother-of-pearl light.

Noon

You and the threshing crew
Come in from the heat-pricked
Fields, they heavy
Bundles, the weeds, the cruel
Stubble.

You wash in the cool
Well water dipped into the white
Basin set on a box under the cottonwood,
And wipe on the towel hung
On the fence, and then lie
Down in the uncertain shade.

The wife
Will call you for dinner soon. She
Has been frying chickens
And baking apple pies all morning.

She stands in the July kitchen,
The cook stove glowing. She is stirring
The gravy with her right hand
And holding a towel in her left
To wipe the sweat from her face.

You and the other men come in
And sit at the table, which is covered
With a new oilcloth,
And you eat, giving your attention to the boiled
potatoes and the hot
Biscuits, and not talking until
She brings you your pie and pours
Another cup of coffee. Then you lean
Your elbows on the table
And say, "I think the oats
Will make forty bushels to the acre."
She brushes a rough
Hand across her eyes. She had hoped
For something else.

Note

Published in *Fine Arts Discovery*, Fall 1967

Norwegian Spring

After the Ice breaks up In spring,
I come down on the boat from Reisen
with the coffins lashed to the deck
from Tromo and Harstad that are to be burled
with Lutheran funerals In cemeteries
south of the teeth of permafrost.
Winter who lives beneath
the rocky Arctic provinces
Is too proud to take flesh and bone,
not like the dark mouths of the graves at Bergen,
Inside my cabin door I step out of my clothes
In the dark, my skin whiter than glaciers
still clasped In the thighs
of the mountains. The bow
slices through cold spray, the throb
of motors reverberates through steel decks
all night long, and my clothes
make a white pool on the dark floor.

Now that You and I Have Split

You're poisoning the atmosphere
Now that you and I have split
My pickup wears a sign, "No Fear."
I own the streets. I chew. I spit.

Now that you and I have split,
I do the things I damn well please.
I own the streets. I chew. I spit. I
drink good beer and take my ease,

I drive the way I damn well please.
You can fly away to French Jubooti.
I'll watch TV and take my ease —
You just bet your sweet patooti.

You can fly to French Jubooti.
I don't care one wizened fig.
You just bet your sweet patooti,
I've forgotten you, you ugly pig.

I won't care one raisin or one fig
when your plane crashes in the sea.
I've forgotten you, you ugly pig.
You'll never get a text from me.

When your plane crashes in the sea,
I won't cry, float funeral flowers.
You'll never get a text from me.
You can beg and whine and scream for hours.

I won't cry, float funeral flowers
I will not be weeping in my beer.
You can beg and whine and scream for hours.
You're poisoning the atmosphere.

Ocean City, Maryland

No moon. A few stars prick the sky
which Is darker than the sooted stones
that hold our fire. Its red eye goes out.
We lie on the blanket, alone.

Night wind and the smell of the sea,
I kiss the taste of salt on your mouth.
Tomorrow will come like an opal bursting,
red in the east and orange south.

Note

Published in *Fine Arts Discovery*

Old

On this side the weather leans
Less heavily, perspective
Shifts, the lights and lines
Move. I remember in elective
Roses and razors, sweet and fine,
The tender words of the most tedious scenes.

Old Men on the Benches, Terril, Iowa

The old men sit on the benches outside
the pool hall in the sun, sit there, don't
say much. Once in a while a dusty Ford
or rusty Chevy pulls into the town,
parks across the street at the Farmer's Cash,
clatters down to Slim Jorgensen's John Deere
tractor store. They have been there since Plato
observed them beside the Plaka's taverns,
since Bill Shakespeare knew them at Stratford up-
on Avon. They are Rip Van Winkle's old
cronies. They think they are legislating
time and weather. They announce important
events such as when they will go home
to their wives' dinners. They know the young
don't know anything and now they see
that what they know doesn't mean much
except that joy is to sit in the sun,
to eat a hearty meal,
to watch with old friends while dust settles.

Old Soldier

He lies there in the hospital
Bed, the side rail turned
Down this morning, breathing
Heavily, and he talks about
The flowers that came in plastic
Vases and the letters from the Legionnaires.
There aren't many of the AEF
Left, not many of the Sunrise Division,
He knows.

These last few years
He has played taps for many
Of the comrades. He will not
Play again. There isn't enough breath
Left in him.

He talks about the weather.
The corn will rot,
Too cold, too wet. The minister
Has not come. He doesn't like the minister
Anyway, nor his mealy-
Mouthed prayers. The hospital food is bad.
He does not say
Death sits on his pillow,
And that he is afraid.

He does not know how to talk
About it. I do not want to
Upset him, so I do not
Talk about it either,
And I go away knowing neither
Of us has said anything that makes
Any difference, just as always.

Optimistic Poem

There is still ingenuity on earth. Some science
thinkers,
Please God, there are still tinkers
I remember Pappy, the old geezer who ran the
steam engine
for the threshing machine, who had built an
airplane when he
was young — not as good as that of the Wright
Boys', but he
and across the vast prairies, foolish young men
who had high
hopes and knew how to do things, weren't afraid of
trying,
their granddaughters and great granddaughters
are in their labs,
in their studies thinking, thinking.

Ouzel Falls

Colorado

Two people sit on a boulder,
face different directions.
If he looked up, he could see
the tangled veil perpetually falling
over Ouzel Rocks; she could watch
the shorter falls, still pools at the sides
where the swift ouzel bird dives,
then swims underwater,
a small black arrow, targeting
his insect dinner, but neither of them looks.
They read paperbacks brought in their knapsacks
with lunches, water bottles, rain gear,
lugged up the steep switchbacks
to this enormous weaving and unweaving
of lacey patterns
embroidered with broken strings of pearls.
Scattering on flat rocks below,
clear water spreads in sheer silk fans,
ruffled white at the edges. Mist drifts
above them; falls' enormous voice roars
in the combers coming over,
and I wonder what writer's words can be heard
above it? Milton? Dante?
Sea-singed Homer?

Pain

I could peel away my shadow in the sun
more easily than you. And in the shade
you leeched beneath my skin; tenacious
as a sense of guilt. At night you laid

your head upon my restless pillow.
I have seen the glinter of your cruel knife.
You wield it well and often. You are more
persistent than a nagging wife.

Hand grasping rigid hand we run
along the path from which no paths depart.
And you have taught me, wild companion,
one thing: Endurance has no heart.

Note

Published in the *North American Review*

Past Summer, Past Somewhere

Relinquishing summer, absorbed by rock,
skyscrapers cool down in the soft afternoon.
The chasing lights of the city flicker,
the coral neon blooms.
There is a changing in my bones,

a hunger for the wave-tongued shore,
where the world is plain and sensibly drab,
where the cool wet hand of the mist
covers the sumac, grown crimson and mad,
and the hoarse gulls cry for home.

Come lie down by the spiraled shells
to savor the pale sun, rethink the past,
remark the small crabs scurrying,
and beyond, a place where the wind-warped grass
clutches the grey and lonesome dunes.

Note

Published in *Fine Arts Discovery.*

Picking Fallen Corn In Terril, Iowa

The Chinese pheasants,
red ring around the cock's neck,
encircled with white and jet
cry in Mandarin, resonant.

Their feathers, Oriental, glint
green; they hide and chirr
in Fox grass, mullein, cocklebur,
lonesome for bamboo reeds that print

dark, delicate shadows. Here, cold
and poor in Terril, ice-pearled
and snow sifted furrows, a girl
picks up, throws the gold

corn, hears the famous
birds alien epithet,
she, too, hungry for an art
for icons, false and luminous.

The Place Where You Stand
at Spirit Lake

The place where you stand is the true place,
sutras written on the sand by the broad brush
of storm waves — Arabic in its grace and swirls.
The wind writes with the trees.
The black twigs change their configurations;
their words not permanent, erased as soon
as written, so you must read quickly. The ice
holds the message longest, sometimes all winter.
You might puzzle it out if you were a northern,
a pickerel; even the blue gills can read it.

Poem in Praise of Capital Punishment
Ft. Madison State Prison

Down the hill, around a curve,
and the Mississippi moved before us,
then surprising as a dead Christmas,
the psychic daughter was afraid, fear
like an icicle through the chest when she saw it,
the evil Castle of Count Dracula, where he sucked
the blood of servants was not more evil.
Crime cannot reform crime, and pity
the man so poor he works for guard money here.
The town uneasy, your plate lunch sits queasy on
my stomach, and
guilt wears away at the levees. Sometimes the
cruel mouth
opens and spews out a mutilated thing on the rest
of us.
The bastille is gone, no rubble left. I wanted to
pull down a stone, but the Fort squats, a perverted
giant defecating here by the great river

Porch Woman

An old woman rests on a rickety chair
on apartment house porch,
lights a cigarette, leans back,
watches scruffy street sparrows
pick through the dust, traffic's
monotonous dance patterns,
kids who weave In and out
with candy bars and popsicles
from Seven-Eleven next door.

Lady, at night when you go to your little room
and toss In the sweaty sheets,
outside your window
rock and roll bounces from boom boxes,
police sirens whine; from somewhere
a couple screams at each other.
Do you dream of the dark stranger
spreading a plastic tablecloth,
setting out delectable Little Debbles,
Wonder cupcakes, Twinkies, bringing forth
Red Baron Pizza — pepperoni jeweled,
covered with mozzarella gold?
A red and white striped carton
of Kentucky Fried? Hoot 'N Annies
Potato Chips, Frito-Lay's Tostitos,
and the banished bandito resurrected
in your dreams, alive, grinning,
ready to chase you around the bed?

Six months till
St. Agnes Eve, but take his hand,
creep down the hall, rank with the fumes
of cooked cabbage, past the landlord's door,
where he snores in front of his TV,
his seventh beer tipping from his hand,
past the black lab sprawled across the steps,
out into the night where the diesel fumes
farted by the last bus dissipate;
a crescent moon rises above the stacks
of Cargill, higher than the towers of Quaker Oats,
and there, on the cracked sidewalk,
dance in the pure slivers of light.

Potato Patch

I remember mother carrying
her battered tin pail,
making her way
down the path, around the brittle weeds,
to the potato patch where the digging fork
stood upright, a skinny, rusty sentinel.
She set her foot and lifted the black soil,
exposed the nest of Round Reds.
Shaking off the dirt, she kept the big ones
and even the little ones, small as marbles
or little moons.

I imagine her now,
still going out to the garden,
picking a pathway through the stars.

Propinquity

"We are not alone." Kepler astronomer

The perfect match hides
somewhere in the flattened platter of our Milky Way
yearning to connect, but loneliness
like three am's* empty streets,
only one insomniac in the diner.
Make do, scramble under the broken table for the pieces.
Search for the yearning heart's other half.
Romania's pot trees, hung with derelict cooking pans
blackened, dulled aluminum, chipped yellow and blue, one red.
Sri Lanka's Sunday Observer, ads from mamas
searching for the professional for the accomplished daughter:
"Caste not important."
Beyond our galaxy, others unknown, whirling
with possibilities, the lights of UFOs
Quatar: fathers read the Koran
over two babies, cousins, boy two-years-old
girl newborn. Keep the money in the family.
At least 1235 planets orbit nearby stars
54 in habitable zones,
That's the problem isn't it? Which one?
Where? My mother peruses the Atlas from 1920
Dots are farmsteads. Maudie married Orville
from the next farm. Hilda on Log Road married Ezra
across the creek. She married my father from Clay county,
practically another country
Today Hubble, Kepler, enormous distances, empty space
black holes, brown dwarfs, girl's complexion wheatish
cash in the pocket, red pot means marriageable daughter,
even the lone coffee drinker goes home.
Black, brown, yellow, white, holy book, broken book,
Log Road graded and paved over, creek dried up,
Light years, star miles, individual lives (pin pricks)
on the map, elliptical orbits, eHarmony and PerfectMatch
The star's caste makes no difference (but it really does).

Note

Intended A.M.'s?

The Real Stars

The star people go to Hollywood and see
the Star Walk, metal star shapes
with names beside them.
They ask, "Where is Mighty Orion?"
The Pleiades, who successfully evaded him,
giggle and search for their names.
They aren't there, and shy Sterope
is secretly glad, she who hides herself
in shame over marrying a mortal.

They decide these stars are modern,
but they can't find the names of Buddha,
Jesus, Dorcas who was good to the poor,
Mohammed, Francis of Assisi,
or Jeanne d'Arc.
Where's Dietrich Bonhoeffer,
Mother Theresa, Bishop Tutu?

They remember Christa McAuliffe,
who became a star
for a falling instant.
They carry flowers to NASA
where Mission Control
doesn't know what to do with them.

Recurring Dream of Rooftops
Villa Montalvo, California

Tonight in this state of imagination, California,
where the winds speak Hawaiian and Japanese,
shush in the Himalaya pines,
I sit in bed reading
William Makepeace Thackeray's 1844
Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo.

In the Oval Courtyard below Senator James Phelan
gave parties around the pool, filled in,
sodded over now. Mary Pickford,
Helen Wills, the tennis star, Florence Ellon,
his mistress, swam in its blazing blue
crater. I hear them dive in, swim languidly,
their supple arms rise, fall,
sleek heads turn to open their red lips
for breath.

On page 417 I find a paragraph describing
my recurring dream from childhood.
Now I know where I traveled night after night
through a black and white dream. Smooth white rooftops
stretch out across the city; I leap
from place to place above the dark alleys,
almost flying, dodge the white mounds
of domes here and there. A few palms
fringe the horizon.

Those beauties who sunned
after their swim, took tea on the terrace,
were they, too, on Thackeray's Holy Land tour?
Was Jim one of the gentlemen who bought long rifles
for the journey from Jericho to Jerusalem?
Was I one of the ladies who stayed at the Russian Convent?
I examine my arms for the faint blue
tattooed Jerusalem cross, search my pockets
for the hawker's souvenir shells engraved
with the face of Saint Veronica.

Jim reclines, ghostly in his ghostly chair;
he has put away his olive wood rosaries,
his curved Arab saber, and now I close
the deckle-edged book.
Tonight I dream of the artists here
at Villa Montalvo now: Jon, Esme, Suzanne, Greg,
see their faces through translucent auras
of cobalt blue, Ming yellow, Alazarin crimson.
All of us run, leap earthquake chasms
like the mule deer, sway with the Monarch butterflies
clustered like grapes on willows' frail limbs,
stand on the flat rocks at Look-out Point
while the mist comes in from the sea
turquoise, emerald, aquamarine.

Red Raincoat

Red raincoat,
exclaims
against grey
flaunts color,
despite stratocumulus deceit,
insists sun breaks its black shell
every morning, spills yellow
over world, declares
dandelions burst calyx cases
every spring,
make suns at our feet.

Redwoods

Redwoods have principles, are particular
where they take their stand.
They colonize the draws
of these coastal mountains. March
upward, but only so high; there are altitudes
above and below where they will not go.
Their root structures shallow, but they cluster
together for mutual protection from winds;
if one goes down, its children rise
from the ring of its foundation.
Standing like a dwarf among them
I look out from their shadows.

Their soft, alternating flat needles
drink the fogs: grey-green draughts of fall;
pale, icy cups of winter;
Norwegian-eye-blue mists of spring,
mauve, rose, salmon, shell pink
in summer. Their rough bark in striated patterns.
protects them from fire. Even when they burn a
little,
they continue to stand and grow. One in the
Cowell
park is naturally hollowed out, a room
where Longmont and his expedition camped!

Old enough to be Jesus' children
They are patient; a thousand years
is no more than a single breath to them.
I like their cool scent, the way they divide
the sunlight, slicing it between their trunks
as if it were golden bread, their silence
which says, "Wait."

Remembering a Farm Thanksgiving

The cousins
layered in the back seat tumbled out, carrying
their clarinets, trombones, one tuba, and Estella
who yodeled.

Aunt Gossip, Uncle Milktoast,
Mother fussing
over roasting chickens, four pies in the oven,
Father frowns at their shiftlessness.
Uncle Milktoast hems, haws, Aunt Gossip
tells her slightly risqué stories that Mother
doesn't want her girls to hear.

After dinner, cousins sing, dance,
blow their horns, red and blue tunes
on pitch and off. They're simple, full of beans,
leaving an ellipsis when the early sun sinks
and they wave good-bye in Pig Latin.

Their spavined car wheezes away
leaving a long silence in the pear's bare branches.

I remember,
still thankful for it all.

Riches

Canning tomatoes is easier
than canning green beans. Just think how many
beans
you have to snap (both ends) to fill one quart jar.
Tomatoes, much bigger, dipped in boiling water
then skins slide off slickly
and you pop them into jars,
fill them with water past the shoulder,
add the teaspoon of salt at the top,
stretch the pink rubber band around the neck,
tighten the lid, but not too tight,
lift them gently into the boiling water bath.
You bring the water to boiling again,
leave them there for an hour —
keep firing the range, poking sticks of wood
into the stove's greedy mouth. When you remove
them,
setting them down carefully on a clean white
dishtowel,
you admire the brilliant reds, the yellow seeds
floating in the juice like flakes of gold.

Rivers and Rocks, Sioux City, Iowa

You don't remember the day we watched by the river
below us, the devious Missouri pushing to return
to its old bed, you and I on the hill
where Sergeant Floyd's monument points its single finger
at the sky.

You spoke Colorado, I spoke wind and rivers far, far west.
I, already in exile; you at home with a conventional coat.
I cautioned you St. Vrain, rocketing down from Ozell Falls,
pooling beside Calypso, flirting with sedge on the banks,
warned you — worse, the Big Thompson, lisping the patient stones
south of Estes, but a puma's heart, ready to leap
through the canyon, taking the rabbits, trees, roads,
the cars, the fishermen, leaving the trout
to flop through the shops in the town.
Three years later it wasn't the river
that took your weak son;
it was the treacherous air, your denial.

You don't remember that day by the river.
when you told me they expected you to marry her,
though you did not love her, could not love her.

And I have forgotten the kiss I never gave you.
I have forgotten it all.

Rivers and Rocks [Another version]

I saw the great fields before us
fly off, circle, banking the curves, become flying carpets,
Alladin, oh, al-Ahdin, across the undisciplined deserts,
the alien rivers, above the stone bridges built by Germans
at Kandahar, now cemented to dunes on one side, unfettered the other,
dry wadi beneath, winking at Western technology.
Over three arches at Cyrrus, wide enough for two Roman chariots
to pass, across Pont Neuf, over sabots dancing the bridge at Avignon,
across the Charles at Prague, where the statues levitate
and salute me. Over London Bridge, disoriented in the Arizona desert,

Above the serious Platt, that wanders over the shallow aquifer,
where the sand cranes settle after days on the flyway
from Yukon to Texas, all quacking, barking, clattering, shuffling
beside the marshes, gleaning the fields,
and then the devious Missouri, pushing to return
to its old bed, but you and I stood on the hill above it ,
the monument to Sergeant Floyd pointing its single finger
at the sky, the river we would never cross together

You spoke Colorado, I spoke wind and rivers far away.
I, already in exile, you at home with a conventional coat.
I told you St. Vrain, rocketing down from Ozell Falls,
pooling beside Calyso, flirting with sedge on the banks,
warned you — the Big Thompson, lisping the patient stones
south of Estes, but a puma's heart, ready to leap
through the canyon, taking the rabbits, trees, roads,
the cars, the fishermen, leaving the trout
to flop through the shops in the town.
But it wasn't the river that took the your weak son;
it was the treacherous air and your denial.

You don't remember the day we watched by the river.
when you told me you were expected to marry her,
but you did not love her, did not love her.
And I have forgotten the kiss I never gave you.
I have forgotten it all.

Rowdy I and Rowdy II

I had forgotten the rowdiness of children,
how they jump on the bed, pillow fight,
yell and scream in delight and in anger —
how they whine, drag their feet,
lose mittens, socks, directions for making
pageant costumes, spoil their appetites with
candy.
I had forgotten their constant clamor,
their fascination with dinosaurs, their love and
horror
of monsters and ghosts, but most,
I had forgotten their honesty.
"You have wrinkles under your chin,"
and "Andrew's grandma is fat, too."
I had forgotten their warm little arms,
and their silly, sloppy kisses.

Ruth Rogers
1926-1986

Tuesday, April 29, 1986:
Today the nuclear energy plant at Chernobyl is
burning.
The Russians cannot put out the fire.
The Ukraine glows in the dark like an old alarm
clock,
the hills — beacons, the trees — torches,
the little stone houses will click like grasshoppers
for centuries.

Today seven black hearses wheel slow
across Florida, carrying seven astronauts.
But they explode forever
in the fireball of our imaginations,
flung into outer space
among the six lonely sisters,
a new and shining company.

In this day of burning we buried Ruth Rogers
who forgave the furnaces of Auschwitz
who forgave the conflagration of cancer.
Tonight the lilacs wilt on her grave
in the Jewish cemetery,
but fireflies appear early
and stitch the darkness
beside her name.

Second Graders
at Harding School Clinton, Iowa

These second graders come in from recess
carrying the cold on their mittens, coats,
stocking caps, their cheeks like Christmas roses.
They look like angels, want to do everything right.
They want teacher's yes, yes, yes.
They are innocence and guile,
maple sugar and vinegar. They wiggle in their
seats,
make more squeaks being quiet
than a flock of sparrows.

Their future, like the fields
outside the windows at Harding School,
is open or closed, winter or spring
before them, promising and threatening
like December's crystal air.

Saving the Hogs
The U.S. Weather Service reports that high
temperatures and humidity today create potentially
dangerous conditions for confined animals.

WMT Radio Farm News
July heat shimmer over corn fields,
flies drone low, dust scuffs.
Hogs, too hot to squeal, belly dry dirt.
I work the pump handle slow.
Its bulbous sides sweat; cold water
gushes the iron lip, down onto
those fat porkers. They grunt, push against each
other, wallow; they loll their
rounded bacon sides in the cool, not
remembering long ago some ancestors,
suddenly possessed, jumped off a cliff
in Palestine, little red pig eyes bursting with
demons.
The waters of mercy lie deeper
than the well shaft pierces. Here no secret
pickerel swims, no mussel shell opens and shuts
like a faulty fan. The fisher king has pearl eyes,
opalescent and unseeing.

Secondary Recovery at Kermit, Texas

Engine's steady whine,
drill's rhythmic thump,
percussion into the desert's crust
sends aphrodisiac messages
to those creatures of the ruby eyes,
whose skin, soft as a lady's,
lies in lapped rows like diamond patterned
fish scales. They creep toward it,
listening as if to the Pied Piper
instead of The Western Company of North America.
Enamored, they surround the rig,
undulate beneath the sage brush and mesquite,
dance for the darling,
not daring to make love to her,
unable to abandon her
while the iron inamorata
opens a cleft in the rock,
wet with precious oil.

Seed

Going out, distancing myself from the jeweled world,
Preparing for the long night when, perhaps,
The old corpses will rise up in the graveyard
As Hardy said they did.

But they rose to disillusion, and I lie down in it,
Having seen a world in which the worst
Prospered and the best died in ovens,
Or hacked to death by their neighbors,
Or shot by child-conscripts,
Or burned alive at the World Trade Center,
Or starved while the Sri Lankan official
Bought his fat mistress diamonds and stuffed
His Swiss bank account. The tide
Of human misery becomes tsunami.

After the wave washes over,
What plant will grow?

Maybe that ragged weed, hope.

Seed Savers

The seed savers grow Howling Mob sweet corn, so sweet that farmers, bringing it to town,
were besieged; and Mandan Bride, handed down
by North Dakota Indians; popcorn
from New Hampshire; heirloom seeds named Tom Thumb;
and Silver Bell Squash; Stars and Stripes melons;
old-fashioned zinnias; and herbs that come
from China; Argentine ancients. The savers plan,
harvest, for any future holocaust.
Oh savers, widen your scope and collect:
hounds, striped cats, lady bugs, small bees. The loss
of black birds, peacocks, cut throat trout, stiff-necked
giraffes would devastate us and we need
laughter, luck, hope, peace. Oh, save these bright seeds!

Self-Reconstructive Surgery

"I slipped and fell in the shower," she told me, "a week after my emergency appendectomy," and my belly button popped outward, not inward." She raised her shirt to show me. "I was frantic, phoned the surgeon, got an immediate appointment. He looked at it, pushed it back in, fastened it with super glue. Real super glue. The hospital buys it in industrial quantities. He told me I should carry some with me, so if it happens again, I can glue it back myself."

Sheets

hang washed sheets on line
before going to work
they swallow wind like sails
pillow cases flap like wings
tonight our bed scented
with sweet northern breezes

riding the jet stream
in the dark
supreme in their eiderdown
Canadian geese
cry faint and far above us.

Shift Knobs

On your way to the moon
or over the moon
or mooning someone
(not recommended),
or moonstruck:

Moon steering wheels
Moon wheel discs
Moon gauge set, white or black
(will not tell you moon phases)
Moon shift knobs
or even
Rat Fink Knobs
in a variety of colors.

Shorthorns

Western shorthorn cattle graze in a circle,
their young in the center; sometimes a fawn
with them while a doe watches from the fringe of trees.
During blizzards they keep walking in great ovals, tromp
a sure path, nudge the weak ones to keep moving, survive.
When calves are new-born, the mothers are more suspicious
than Spanish bulls. The cow bawls, lowers her great head
and charges. The girl, carrying grain, sees the white curls
between its closed eyes, nostrils distended, ears laid back.
She steps to the left, feels the hot breath, runs for the fence
before it can turn. Her legs seem to move in slow motion.
Safe, she watches from the other side, saying, "So boss,
so boss," softly to sooth it. The calf, new red and white,
licked clean, wobbles, confused by such enormous violence.

The Shuttle

Hot in the morning, the sun boiled up
Over the square fields; the tall corn
Swished its taffeta leaves together
In the hot wind. From the back steps
She looked across the empty miles,
Searing in the Iowa sun.

She heard a far-away piano
Playing music full of lovely lies
In a soft room. She wiped her hands
On her apron and strained
Toward the sound of small talk.

Later
She gagged on the hors d'oeuvres
And choked on the clichés.

She waded out into the wash of traffic
Where the diesel exhaust of the buses
Filtered blue through the oily
Chicago night.

Note

Published in *Poetry Bag* 1:3 Spring 1967

Signs and Miracles

Joseph of Arimathea brought the Holy Grail to Glastonbury
where faith healed those who saw it, touched it.
But the times grew evil and the holy cup
disappeared from the church
and no one has been healed for ages there.

Silence

Verbs have flown, gone with the geese
to Mississippi, with white pelicans to Texas,
Nouns have sunk under water,
buried in the lake's mud where frogs,
hurrying toward hibernation, hopped across
the highway's lanes in the dark. Hundreds,
thousands,
smashed into a slick green smear.
Sparrows have swallowed conjunctions.
Adjectives were swept away with the wind
out of Ontario, and adverbs were harvested
with the golden corn, dried and stored
in bins. You never speak to me now
and there is nothing left
but dangling prepositions, hanging
like cones on the fir trees' tips.

Silver Snake

Recoiled, I snap my tail —
my solitary sound —
against this flattened shell
when I am fully wound.

I hold my numbers close —
loose them at your pleasure.
It requires a hard pull
to take my measure.

(Steel tape measure)

Sioux City

He cruises up and down Fourth Street,
back and forth on Pierce,
pulls up beside a Chevy Impala
full of girls who laugh
and beat him away from the stop light.
He honks, races after them,
loses them at the north end;
the blondes of happiness disappear
in the dark,
and he will never be the same again,
his Trans Am never as good,
although he grinds out the cylinders
for a faster take-off, hooks up a musical horn
that plays the Iowa Fight Song,
installs a frosted window classic:
white deer in a forest on the back window.
This night is gone,
hot, humid — meteors shooting across the horizon
at Stone Park, falling over the Missouri River,
falling over South Dakota and Nebraska,
all Iowa and the east behind him,
the leaping antelope and the wild plains
stretching before him toward the ultimate west
where the wheels of the sea
grind stars into shining sand,
falling on the shores of China.

Sister

When Dee Dee found rats
in the barn's feed room,
she killed them with the sharp
edge of the scoop shovel.

They ran, harried by that
certain fear, the join
to death. The worst part
was their screams, that novel

shrill sweet cry, not heard
other times. She despised
me. I couldn't kill
rats. She thought I was afraid.

She tried to dig my words,
my conscience for disguised
meaning, suspected still
I hid some deeper than her spade.

Note

Published in the *Iowa English Bulletin*

Sky Pond

Here above the tree line, dark water stopped
at grey shoulder of Taylor Peak,
we pick our way around boulders
to the crack in the granite wall
that displays three spires: Sabre;
Petit Grepon; Sharkstooth.
Watch two miniature climbers,
spin their spider thread ropes.

At our feet the pond's grey trout
fin slow in cold water;
grey thunder heads pile up.
We put away binoculars, sling packs
over our shoulders, reluctant.

But we know if we stay,
the tallest points on these bare rocks,
we could attract lightning's flash,
a million drums' thunder, a quick, spectacular end,
And so we begin our descent
away from that flickering temptation,
through the thin mountain air
into the dark arms of the firs below us.

Sky Pond [another version]

Here above the tree line, dark water stopped
at grey brow of Taylor Peak,
we pick our way around boulders
to tarn's outlet where horizon cracks,
displays three spires, Sabre, right,
Petit Grepon's needle, center,
Sharkstooth, left where two climbers,
diminished by distance, spin
their spider threads.

We rest on granite, watch grey trout
fin slow in cold water, grey thunder heads pile up,
We put away binoculars, sling packs
over our shoulders, reluctant to leave
this solitude.

But we know, if we stay here,
our Olympian potential could make
thousands of volts' flash, gorgeous,
a million drums' cacophony, energy
expanded only once to a spectacular end.

We would rather
spend our powers over a longer period of time,
let them ease out as we descend,
drive home across the prairies,
into our jobs, our daily lives,
which are somehow changed now, lifted.

Sleeper

Clods full of sleeping seeds. Dandelions
came to the New World in ballast.

Now gold medallions button the grass
everywhere, so common they are named weeds.

The milky elixir from their stems
stains children's hands, the kids

too young to know these are worthless —
and worse, are pests. They see only beauty,

rayed stars in the green grass sky.
So much beauty is worthless.

Except for itself.

Sonnet for Spirit Lake

The road to Spirit Lake is wet with rain
The wipers' lashes move with meows of pain
while I drive past the towns across this plain
that hide their secrets: here a weather vane

upon the church above the street named Main,
past shiny elevators storing grain,
the summer's golden harvest, passing trains
that hoot away, trailing a sad refrain.

Though blurred by rain, I see the towns' disdain
of leavers — won't admit their folks have pain,
recovery, and hope and hope in vain,
romance, betrayal, sin, and sin restrained
or not, corn prices up or down, loss/ gain,
crop sold too low, the lover gone again.

1/30/2018

Sore Throats

I always felt sorry for the kids
who had to wear strips of flannel
soaked in kerosene around their necks.
For those who were bandaged with mustard
plasters,
My mother made me drink
hot lemonade with honey, a pleasure
even when swallowing was pain. To sit
at the dining room table, reading, sipping
it as hot as my lips could stand, its sweetness
from places I had never seen:
dark green tropical groves,
the humming interior of hives;
feeding my imagination with California,
with secret largess of bees.

Sounds of Cerulean

The song ascends and descends
in the blue night,
oboe and bassoon, violas sobbing
and the drum broken.

We have not been vigilant or thrifty;
we spent our days of dandelions and daisies
squandered lilies and lilacs,
oh, the love that was not right
but was sweeter than jasmine after rain.

The desert confounds us.
Its sky bleached of all blue.
We loved the oasis, the willow green,
trailing its tear-shaped leaves
in the river.

We were right; we were wrong
we broke the guitar, abandoned the piano
took our allegiance to the sea
who rewarded us not at all.
There is not enough devotion
to satisfy that hungry blue maw.

A better house we said
and no green turban at the foot of the coffin
A larger life than our skin held us in —
there was only one escape from it
and even then some said you had
to take it with you or be damned.

We were purse poor and eyes rich,
although we can't remember it all:
the stone elephants pasturing
at _____

The reclining Buddhas
do not arise at Dambulla,
the hot coal walkers at Kandy
do not scorch their feet
Poya drums keep away
the evil spirits
and the cobra protects them.

The Tube is grey and Covent Gardens is gay

the whirl of dust and impatience.
Wild daffodils still dilly and dally
along the road to Harrogate.
Queen Anne's lace doilies all over
the roadside to Leeds and Manchester.

Cullen skink in Edinburg
and on the North Sea, you intent
on entering the old stone house at
An Struther. It must have been
some ancestor calling you.

A very British mist over the hills
at _____ and the guesthouse tea, boiled
until it screamed bubbles, and we were wrong
and right and wouldn't say so.
Two beggars along the street — leprosy

Still, the little flat in Prague
and the cherry tree holding its homage
we plucked from the balcony.

The night we danced until three
at the wedding in Aleppo — didn't go to bed
but caught the bus, a terrible
Egyptian comedy on powerhouse decibels
all the way to Damascus.

The painted churches in Romania,
exterior warning since the 17th century
that devils with pitchforks torture great sinners,
pots of boiling oil, naked women turning on a spit,
fornicators strung up by their balls

From _____ to Asos, the ferry throbbing
sun setting behind
the broken pillars of Point Sonion
where Bryon carved his initials
and Neptune did not arise to rebuke him,
although the fever that killed him later
may have been delayed vengeance.
I thought about that.

The blue doors of Sidi Bou Said,

so close to Tunis, so close to ravaged Carthage,
now the blue and white mosaics of the saint's tomb
burned, tiles cracked like walnuts, spoiled
by the righteous religious who would purify,
straightjacket everything beautiful
and delightful, no saints, no wine, no dancing, no laughter.

But we will not let you have all the blue in the world
oh growers of long beards, hewers of the tree of knowledge,
hypocrites in the mosque. Here in Iowa
all summer long
we have the endangered
Cerulean Warbler

Brave traveler, who winters in the coffee plantations
of the Andes, who returns in May with a courting trill
zee, zee, zee, zee, zeezhh, the pitch rising at the end.
in the canopy of the oaks and elms at McGregor
on the bluffs and ravines of the Mississippi.

Spirit Lake and Shang-lin Park
(after a poem by Ssu-ma Hsian-Ju)

Between Little Spirit Lake on the west
and Great Spirit Lake on the east, this isthmus —
where green, mud-colored salamanders with yellow pin dots,
black pearl eyes and dragon eyelids lie sunning
on the bank above the rushes and water sedge,
where snow geese rest, spring and fall from their migrations
down the jet streams of the Missouri flyway.
Here are mallards with iridescent green heads; and teal,
spruce blue triangles marking their brown and white wings.
On Great Spirit's beach, gulls walk clumsy on the shore.
White heron stands on one leg in the shade, his knee the gnarl
in a water stalk, and the blue one, color of fog after sundown,
comes in for a landing, his feet stretched straight
behind him like storks in Turkey. Owls, too, hoot owls
cluck like fat chickens, cry like lost children,
and the great horned owl perches on the old windmill's
dry cistern as stars fade onto the sky and fireflies
begin their phosphorescent tick-tack-toe.

Oh Ssu-ma Hsian-Ju, you have the Shang-lin Park
of the Sea of Heaven located where eight rivers come together;
sturgeon in your waters, dace, bream and gudgeon,
and grey lizards sun on the uncut jade of the banks. Wild geese,
black swans with snake necks, coral beaks, and suspicious,
coral-rimmed eyes, greylegs, cormorants, grebes, and night herons.
The hornless red dragon sleeps in the cinnamon forest;
the golden-scaled dragon hides in bamboo thickets.
At Great Spirit Lake, no dragons under the cottonwoods
but tanned girls in bikinis; tanned boys
drive speed boats; water skiers plow the lake,
and fishing boats rock in clusters, wait for perch to bite.

The rich, second-hand car dealer from Sioux City
drinks Cutty Sark on the rocks, watches boats and swimmers —
blind to pollywogs hatching and cat tails' brown cigars
exploding, spitting their generations to the wind.
Joe Gooddeal sees foxfire in the night. The tax-paying Republican
goes to the window, alarmed, but it's gone. After he lies down,
its flicker lights the ceiling again. He tells himself
it's nothing, but lies awake,
listens to the distant waves tom-tom the shore.
In dark inlets carp remember their first phonemes;
in nearby fields Chinese pheasants chant Mandarin songs,
and he dreams he's crossed the border,
a stranger in a foreign country,
can't read the signs, can't speak the language,
can't buy anything with his murderous currency.

Spring

I know what is right; I know what is wrong,
and I kept my council, kept my oath.
For years your name's not touched my tongue.

The red bird below the cliff sings songs;
yeast still leavens the baking loaf.
I know what is right; I know what is wrong.

Your letters burned, your picture torn,
I think only of my children's growth.
For years your name's not touched my tongue.

For funerals and weddings the church bells rung,
and I walked proper with a proper mouth.
I know what is right; I know what is wrong.

The horses in the fields stomp and run;
I ignore their incantations, north and south.
For years your name's not touched my tongue.

Tonight white blossoms on the wild plum
insist on calling up your buried ghost.
I know what is right. I know what is wrong —
for years your name's not touched my tongue.

The Stacker

Inside the ring, beach campfire's gold and red.
A swirling wind stretches the flames' fingers.
Waves beat against the shore, sounding sand drums,
the sound of earth's great heart pulsing. Children

in a circle, sprawl, small voices murmur.
No moon. The scent of rain. The clouds say squalls
will roil in later. Sam feeds the dry sticks
into the fire, pokes, sparks fountain fire falls,

and David sings a song clear, innocent.
We unwrap the trusty graham crackers,
the rich brown Hershey chocolate bars for s'mores
and squeeze them together —I'm the stacker.

They wait like fledglings, chirping. Marshmallows
charred almost black on the outside, sappy
inside. They gobble them — and beach, and sky,
then lick their sticky fingers. I'm happy

for no good reason. Behind us the world
stretches back in misery. Famine, war
expand, but here a haven, peacefulness,
a fire, a song, love, between clouds: one star.

Tea

Spirit Lake, Iowa, this January morning is ten below
and drifts, I shovel steps, driveway, mail box;
come in, brew a pot of hot tea and think of Ceylon,
its hills covered with dark green shrubs as tall
as the women who pick the uppermost leaves.
They chatter like finches, weave in and out with flat,
round baskets. I see their blue and orange dresses,
the hot yellow sun, the broken umber carvings
of dancers in bas relief, holding their positions
for centuries where delicate hands spread leaves
to dry on the stone porches of ruined temples.
I sit in my kitchen, the scent of Ceylon,
the sun of ancient dancers in my mouth.

Note

A note on the typescript says this was to be published in *Seattle Review.*

They

Oh, what distinguishes between the quick
And dead? It is not silence. I have heard
The soft persistent murmurs falling thick
And comforting, and I have been assured
They know. They weep with me. They understand,
For they have stood and searched the darkened glass
As I stand now, unsteady in the sand.
They danced upon the meadows. The morass
I sink in, they explored. They are the dead
Whose names and times I do not even know;
Who sipped champagne or ate a sullen bread.
They stand together, lingering in the glow.
They see how black a sheep I am, how wild
A heart I have. They wait, and they have smiled.

A Thousand Points

The star folk love George Bush
almost as much as the Kuwaitis do.
They think a thousand points of light
is a shaft of shining genius.
They have voluntarily given their light
for centuries, even the dead ones
are still blazing en route.
Earthling astronomers think
they have seen the birth of a star,
but they saw it centuries late.
They are learning, the star folk say,
but slowly. Most earthlings can't shine
at all; most of them are dulled,
sitting before the flickering lights
of their noisy amusement machines,
filling their minds with nonsense
and prurience. Why don't earthlings go out
in their back yards, sit in their lawn chairs
and watch the panorama of the heavens,
something true and bright?

Three Score and Ten

The birds of yesteryear
all flown, gone to the marshes
of Texas, where the cranes
whoop and dance for the females
before the great southern jet streams
waft them north to Canada,

Gone to the forests of the Amazon where
hummingbirds whirr, gone to the piney woods
where maybe the Carolina parakeet s
till lives in secret, not extinct,
but alive in the imagination.

Oh, small, sweet birds, you have carried away
my precious days, springtime and summer,
autumn fading now, winter's breath
cold in my hair. Little birds, fluff up y
our poor feathers, the dark season comes.

My friends are dying.

Traveler

Headlights paint yellow paths on rainslick roads
tail lights trail leaking veins
rain falls like love across Kansas like
benediction
not going home the car's his true home
on the way to California's promised land
24 hour truck stop coffee thicker than blood
waitresses pale under neon splotched
then plastic womb of the Chevy again
all night radio station coming in from Texas
rock drums pound like a heart
moving on

Treading the Flowers
Kandy, Sri Lanka

Rose red, wine red, sunset red, bloody moon red,
heat from the petals of coals arises.
These are not the petals
of deep red frangipani, but blossoms of blood
from more than 20,000 elephants
slaughtered for sport by the British,
who hung the great tusks, finished with silver
end brackets above their mantels,
not the rosettes of red from the leopards
shot for their pelts for the love of the hunt.

Two small men, sarongs tucked up, pray
at the goddess' shine,
step out bare-footed on the rose-glowing charcoal,
treading the flowers,
then on the cool cement floor, turn
and walk back again.

The goddess protects their audacious feet,
but she didn't lift a finger against
the tsunami, or against the politicians
who disappeared their opponents,
tossed their bodies from planes,
to roll in Indian Ocean.

Her tiny arms did not
stop the war that killed 80,000,
the trapped Tamils at Jaffna, old women, old men,
the orphanage children stacked in bunks to the ceiling.
When the shells exploded, they ran through the splintered doors
into machine gun fire spraying like fountains run amok,
and died in the mud
whimpering like animals.

Goddess of limited powers, Goddess of blind eyes,
Goddess of courage-for-no-good-use,
What has died? and what can be saved?
where the fires of justice? the petals of compassion?

The frangipani grows again; palms sprout
small shoots on the killing shore. This is not enough.
There is no enough that's enough.

5/3/2017

Uncle Gay

Daddy came into the house swearing silently.
Mother wiped her hands on her apron,
And help him take off his coat.
"Gay's dead," he said.
She dropped the coat. "He died last night
In the Emmetsburg jail."

"Drunk?" she asked finally.
"Yes," he said. "Lily had called the sheriff."

She sucked in her breath. "But Gay never hurt anyone
When he was drinking. He was a happy drunk."

"That bitch, Lily, poisoned him," Daddy said.
"And now she'll get his inheritance."

So on the day of the funeral
Mother put the Bible on the living room table
And Aunt Lily sat beside it.

Daddy didn't cry until
After she went home.

Uncle Max

At family gatherings he always looked wise,
raised his eyebrows, smiled knowingly to indicate
we, too, ought to understand about business,
about making money. How the government robbed
the ambitious and hard-working.
His eyebrows said that if only inflation
would go down, if the taxpayers didn't have to pay
Social Security to all those widows,
and Aid to Dependent Children
to all those loose women, the go-getters
could blossom, prosper, grow rich.

When his apartment complexes in Houston went bust
and Aunt Marilyn and all the others who had invested
their savings with him wanted their money,
he went mad, went into an asylum,
wouldn't come out except to berate his wife,
scold his children, blame his dead mother,
his eyebrows going up and down like elevators.

Uncle Ned

Uncle Ned was a loner, never took a partner—
"Hell," he said, "I have a hard time getting along
with myself. Partners fight,
Leroy and Scottie fought over whether to eat
beans with bacon or beans without bacon,
and killed each other. I go it alone."
Was one of the first prospectors
into the Black Hills, had a nose for gold,
discovered the Deadwood Mine,
played poker every night at Lucky Nugget,
drank whisky, believed his luck would never run
out.
His full house lost to four aces,
the mine with it, took his pick axe, his donkey,
knew he'd find another one —better, bigger,
the gold richer than the blond hair of the girls
in Union County, Missouri. He planned to go
home rich,
successful, take his choice, didn't consider
the boulder falling on his leg, pinning him there,
how long it took to die without food, water.

University Library

The white pages turn back smoothly,
Like lost lives.
The paper smells of new ink's blackness,
And I remember
The oily black smell of the threshing engine,
Huffing along the gravel road, her cleated
Iron wheels throwing pebbles, pulling the skinny
Separator. I remember the jingling racks following
in procession.

I was only ten and pretending
To be well-behaved.
So Poppy Hopkins, the engineer,
Let me ride with him.

Hank Zitterick, the separator man,
Rode on top of his machine,
A maharaja in his howdah, worrying
About the old iron bridge over Gordon's Creek.

The pimple-faced librarian yawns.
Joe Cooper, who has asthma, starts to cough.
He's embarrassed.
The yellow sun rears through the windows.
They do not hear it.

When we got to the creek Poppy stopped
The engine and yelled, "Got to inspect
The bridge. Hank, go down and take a look."
Hank jumped off the separator
And scrambled
Down the bank under the bridge.

Poppy winked at me, yelled, "Let 'er rip!"
And thundered the rig across,
Blowing the steam whistle and yelling.

The book cart squeaks,
And a tweedy girl frowns.

Hank clawed

Up the other bank, squawking. He stood
At the top, looking at us and shaking,
Too scared to notice his sopping
Overalls. And everybody laughed.

The quiet people in libraries
Are careful how they turn the newspaper
Pages. A discreet rustle is the best
Form.

If you winked at me
I would hear it,
And shut my book with a bang,
And cut out of here, honey, because
I've ridden across an iron bridge
In a steam engine, shrieking
The whistle and yelling.

The Uses of Adversity

Sister breaks hearts,
stands among red shards, smiles.
Father breaks horses and everyone else.
When he walks in the barn, all the animals
obsequious,
he is almost satisfied.

Mother does the impossible:
Breaks water.
Carries shimmering zinc buckets
of well water into the kitchen,
pours a waterfall into copper wash boiler;
when it speaks steam, feeds it a can of Lewis Lye
—
(black death heads on the red and white label).

Lye loosens minerals' grip, bubbles it to the top
in a grey froth which she skims off quickly,
leaving water soft, amenable to soap, kind
to fabric, hands. In our breaking family
she teases out poison's secret,
makes it breathe useful.

Waking In Paris

Pigeons in the courtyard wake at daylight,
rearrange themselves along the chimney steps,
rustle and bumble in the dark, cluck
like fat hens for the kitchen crumbs.
I wish them a pot pie.

I turn over, curl against your arm.
Morning comes through iron grills,
over rigid roses.
I am still drunk,
having spent last afternoon
like a boat floating the ponds of Monet,
tethered like an ivory water lily
by one flexible rope root,
and you come to meet me
with peaches and wine.

Westward Toll

Lift the bones tenderly —
Clean, white bones,
Cleaned by the beetles
And small unspeakable creatures
That burrow deeper than our fears,
Deep as a maggot in the mind.

Young bones, young girls
were buried under that flat
Gray rock.

We children saw the scratches.
"A grave," we said. We told
Our mother.

"I'm busy," she said. "Go back
And play now."

We played in the oak grove
By the lake, dodging
Among the boulders on the point. We
Climbed on the rocks, but not the flat
One. We knew they were there.

The bulldozer for the new road found
Them.

Old Andrew Caldwell said that his mother
Used to tell about a family going
West who camped on the point. Two you
Girls ate poison berries.
So take the bones carefully,
And put them in coffins,
And buy them in the graveyard
In Spirit Lake town.

The bones will forget
The sound of the waves
Mouthing the boulders.

What They Drive at Coe College

The playwright drives
a dark blue Mazda mini-van,
plenty of room in the back
for all those characters who follow her,
those early women flyers
knocking on the windows,
about to burst out into the higher air.

Director of the Writing Center
rides her 1980's bicycle, a white Mesa Runner
that her husband bought her for a wedding
present,
short blue coat, a sail behind her, blond hair
streaming out, smooth and shining
like her sentences.

The old linguist sees all the Stop signs
in Thai and Japanese, in Old English,
translates all the billboard signs along his route,
drives a Cooper, a yellow and black*
bread box.

The college tech guru drives an old brown Dodge,
its back seat filled with yarn for her knitting.
Beneath her magic fingers deleted essays
resuscitate;
lost documents come home; snarled lines unravel,
wind up compliant, neatly in place.
She doesn't berate or laugh or even snicker
at their myriad, multilayered mistakes.

Note

Ann's typescript has "back" here.

What We Thought Was Love

That sweet exaltation, that motorcycle acceleration
in the blood sustains us for a long time,
if we're lucky. Then sledge-hammer disillusion
avalanches downhill, heavy boulders crash
and great winds howl.
Maybe the honey and wine was not love, only a chimera,
a mirage in the desert. Maybe the bread
of love is forgiveness, persistence,
making do with the seriously flawed,
the damaged and broken,
the beach washed away in the hurricane,
accepting the lover, knowing all his human weaknesses,
the pines and the palms stripped and shattered,
and accepting the miserable rag of self,
the sea wall broken and the house roofless now
and open to the rain.

When I was Ten-years-old
Waiting for Life to Happen

It was the Farmers' Cash, the Reliable Pharmacy
with its green-veined black marble soda fountain,
where Tillie Schneiderman who made the malts,
pulled the levers for cherry cokes and Green Rivers,
Grump at the back behind his owlish glasses
studying his pill boxes,
rowdy teen-age boys beside the magazines at the door.
It was Mrs. Sloan who saved my life, presiding
in her grey sweater over the library with its
Postage Stamp Encyclopedia, poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay,
refusing to let kids check out the racy novels,
Charlie Buns at his sewing machine in his harness shop,
redolent of golden-brown leather, stitching together
the spaghetti strips for horses' fringed fly nets,
bank with its iron grilles, its big brass spittoon
in the president's alcove, the telephone office,
its wiry snakes wrapped in patterns of vipers,
water-tower that high school kids climbed every year
to paint the number of their graduating class
on its silver, pot-shaped side, the pointed steeple
of the Lutheran church where the Weiland boys
hoisted a cow on Halloween.

It was this and less and more,
It was longing and gossip, where appearances
were kept up even though the tavern keeper's wife
ran off with Elmer Schultz in his dump truck.
It was the end of the world and "the best place
on earth," my mother said, though mother
was mistaken about many things.

11/18/2013

When Wild Plumb Thickets Bloom Love

My handicapped students:

handsome Puerto Rican boy who walks
with two crutches, dragging his legs —
his mother schizophrenic, institutionalized,
but not before she lost her jobs, was evicted,
ranged from shelter to shelter,
homeless and unwashed
on the squalid streets of Jersey City,
the boy dragging along helpless
and helpless to help her.

and the other in a motorized wheel chair,
his body skeletal, his torso held up
with a steel brace, his fingers grown
grotesque, abnormally long and witch-like.
He dyes his hair red, white and blue.
His quick mind, greedy for adjectives,
obscure nouns, voluminous verbs.

I know what you both long for.
All the whole students in the class,
too polite to even hint at it,
know what you'll never have
and silently pity you, and you both know it.

Wild Orchids

The bracken ferns' party-whistle fronds
unfurl beside Cascades where white water
fizzes, foams, fulminates
over black boulders the size of Volkswagens.
Tiny shell-pink calypso orchids hide here.
I get down on my knees to look at them,
an attitude of worship and inquiry,
a position that brings me back to my life.
Why do all those unfair things
happen to me? To ME?

Orchids' pink tongues don't answer,
Nor do the hummingbirds back at camp,
rufous smallest, most aggressive,
whirring his bronze blades.
He challenges ruby throats,
chases away all interlopers,
although there are five feeding stations
on my red plastic pseudo-flower.
I put a little rock over his favorite, hope
it will show him I don't want his selfishness;
although it weighs more than he does,
he tips it off, persists in his territorial patrols.

I can't understand him,
puzzle about the shy ways of the orchid,
don't hear any answers, but the grass
or the wind, or maybe your faraway wisdom
writes to me: try to accept the questions,
hike the trails; don't demand solutions and succor;
rufous won't change.

Winter

I will not forget you, Ivor Ivorson,
nor your affliction, whether it was honest
or not. I remember the murals you painted
at the Hi Ho Club. The gangster owner liked
the big-breasted goddesses, the swan and the
bull.
I was there one night when the place was raided.
Six men who didn't remove their felt hats stood
in the back and the waitresses didn't serve
liquor until they left fifteen minutes later.
They stared at Minerva bursting from Jove's brain
until Arnie made the pay off. But you, Ivor,
I could imagine you on the scaffolding painting
the languorous folds of Venus' gown and gilding
the apples at Diana's slender ankle, looking
down at Roger Halderstein who got the job for
you.
I see the frozen winds ripple across the snow;
the muscles ripple across your back as you paint
—
it is a cold northern place, but I remember you
and how handsome you were.

Winter in California

She thinks that now her love
is like winter in Northern California,
neither fall or spring.
It's like that space between sleeping
and waking, where haze allows
reality or art, both simultaneous —
a window of time when a light glitters
before the blinds are shut —
the flick of an eyelid,
sudden laugh of the old black woman,
joy erupting between her gap teeth.

Who knows what love is?
Or its infinite varieties?
Concord, Emperor, Flame Tokay, quiescent now.
They wait for an invisible signal.
All their roots busy with their silent business
that will not bear examination.
If pulled out, the probe of their
tenacious fingers broken, they give up, die.
So she aspires to patience, process, the fruit
that comes: yellow, red, green.
She breaks its globular skin between her white
teeth,
eats its slippery sweet meat.
Drops the seeds like tears
on the earth to grow another day.

Winter In Northern California

is neither winter nor fall.
It's like that space between sleeping
and waking, that instant
when a light glitters
before the blinds are shut,
the flick of an eyelid,
wave of a small white hand,
sudden smile of the old black beggar —
joy between his gap teeth,
like love, all ambiguity and infinite variety.
.
Here in the vineyards
quiescent Concord, Emperor, Flame Tokay,
all their roots busy with their silent business
that will not bear examination.
If pulled out, the probe of their
tenacious fingers broken, they give up, die.

So she aspires to patience, process, the fruit
that comes, yellow, red, green;
then breaks its globular skin between her white
teeth,
eat its slippery sweet meat.
Drops the brown seeds, like tears,
in the earth for another day.

Winter Lies

Iowa's last three winters were sissy winters.
What we need is a *real* Iowa winter
with wind that sucks out our breath
when we open the door,
snow blowing like a sandstorm
in the desert of January,
a Worthy Antagonist winter,
so that later we can tell our grandchildren
how tough we were, how we could stand up
to ten blizzards, snow banks as high as houses,
twenty days in a row below zero
(we might stretch it a little),
to impress those neophytes
that we were tough, we were rigorous,
we laughed in winter's icicle teeth!

Winter Reading

I don't know why it's so lovely. I stand
at the window, reading snow against the scrim of the grey-white sky,
while Robert Bly reads Longinus in Minnesota,
David Ray reads Saguaro in Tucson,
my brother, Kirby, reads gas and oil separators in Oklahoma,
Nancy Price reads palm trees in Florida; Kathleen Spivak is reading the Seine in Paris,
Dave Evans in Sioux Falls is parsing poetry while shoveling his driveway;
Ted Kooser in Lincoln is reading watercolors and writing barn red poems.
The dear dead poets read nothing. They lie quietly in their graves;
they sleep through it all.

11/18/2013

Winter Sestina, 1936

Winter icicles hung blue. The sun
had deserted us. Blizzards roared by
with raucous winds, and every cloud
was desperate with snow. Even the train
got stuck far down the tracks. Drifts, trouble,
malevolent weather. It was a <u>real</u> Iowa wintertime.

Too cold, we hung the washing in the house; time
crept slowly. Father pointed out the sun
dogs, two short rainbows beside the pale disk. Trouble,
said the sky, more cold weather. We couldn't buy
a January thaw. A snow plow train
was sent to dig out the first. In a cloud

of steam it roared through town, Black clouds
watched it. The snow, compacted over time,
welded to winter's body, wouldn't yield to old trains,
or snow-plow trains. It, too, got stuck.* The sissy sun
seldom peeked forth. Twenty below by
the thermometer for twenty days straight. Troubled

by brittle cold that stole your breaths. Trouble
was the name of January, and February clouds
dumped more snow. Wind blew it. Cattle stayed in barns by
the hay. We carried water to them all the time.
They drank a lot. We prayed Father, Son
and Holy Ghost. Far off we could see the trains.

still stuck, covered with snow — giant, powerful trains
immobilized. Hens wouldn't lay. Too dark. Too cold. Trouble.
we kept the lights on for them all the time. Dispirited, the weak sun
melted nothing. We chopped wood for greedy stoves. Clouds
of smoke from the chimney ascended like prayers. This Arctic time
could not bow us even if the "sweet bye and bye"

of spring seemed as far away as heaven. Highways and by-
ways were drifted in, but garden catalogues, their train
of spring hope, kept us going. Surely time
would bring onion sets, tomato seeds, weed troubles.
We would welcome weeds if winter left. But no threat, no cloud
would ever be too much for us again. When the winter sun

was finally dragged away by spring, we said good-by,
to snow-bellied clouds, immobilized, impotent trains.
We earned the right to brag our great troubles in that bitter wintertime.

Author's Note:

In the winter of 1936 the M & St.L train got stuck in snow drifts between Terril and Spencer, Iowa. The snow-plow train sent to plow it out also got stuck and they sat there until a spring thaw released them.

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